



Cast

Brooke Adams Nora
Ione Skye Trudi
Fairuza Balk Shade
James Brolin John Evans
Robert Knepper Dank
David Landsbury Hamlet Humprey
Jacob Vargas Javier
Donovan Leitch Darius
Chris Mulky Raymond
Laurie O'Brien Thelma
Julie Condra Tanya
Adam Biesk Brett
Leigh Hamilton Kim
J. Mascis Cecil

Crew

Music by **J. Mascis**
Additional Orchestration by **Barry Adamson**
Edited by **Tracey S. Granger**
Production Designer **Jane Stewart**
Director of Photography **Dean Lent**
Casting by **Pagano/Bialy/Manwiller**
Line Producer **Albert T. Dickerson III**
Screenplay by **Tracey S. Granger**
Based on a novel by **Richard Peck**
Executive Producers **Carl-Jan Colpaert** and **Christoph Henkel**
Produced by **Daniel Hassid, Seth M. Willenson, William Ewart**
Directed by **Allison Anders**

Shade

by Davy Rothbart

Along I-10's most dust-torn and barren stretch, in southwest New Mexico, there's an old truck-stop diner in the sad little town of Deming called the Desert Sky Café, and early one morning in November of 2003, just before dawn, I found myself parked in front of the Desert Sky in a rental Ford, my eyes wet, my hands and my shirt streaked with blood. After a couple of minutes I pulled myself together and headed inside to get breakfast. The place was completely empty other than a no-nonsense waitress in her fifties rolling silverware at the counter and a grizzled old cook in back scraping the grill. I hopped up on a stool, and when the waitress came over, she looked me up and down and said, "Is that blood?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Is that your blood?"

"No."

"Should I call the police?"

"How 'bout I tell you the story and then you decide?"

She looked at me sternly, considering this. Then she plucked a pad and pen from her apron and said, "Okay. What'll you have?"

This was the second time I'd been inside the Desert Sky Café; the first was in 1999 on a road trip from New York City to Cali with my friend Eddie Faktorovich. But the first time I'd ever laid eyes on the place was years before, in the fall of '92, in a movie called *Gas, Food, Lodging*, which takes place in the fictional town of Laramie, New Mexico, but was filmed in Deming.

All through high school, I'd gone alone to see movies downtown at the Michigan Theater, and my visits only increased when I started college and moved into a dorm a few blocks away. One night, a month into my first semester, I went to see *Gas, Food, Lodging*, a story about a middle-aged waitress at the Desert Sky who lives in a nearby trailer park with her two teenage daughters, Trudi and Shade. In just an hour and a half, I fell so deeply and powerfully in love with Shade that when I left the theater I felt like a different person—profoundly transformed and filled with a terrible, rapturous heartache. I remember drifting through town like a ghost, lying down in a patch of damp grass, and staring at the moon for hours. I was overjoyed that I'd found my soulmate, but distressed that she was only a character in a movie—I couldn't exactly leap through the screen and introduce myself. And although it was tempting, I never confused Shade with the actress who played her, Fairuza Balk. I was sure Fairuza Balk was wondrous in her own right, but it was Shade who was my soulmate, it was Shade whom I'd scour the planet to find.

Shade was tough, tender, otherworldly, filled with a bewitching sadness. Her desolate beauty matched the New Mexico landscape, and I dreamed of visiting her town and looking for her there. I went back to the Michigan Theater the next night, my heart torqued and titillated, and then again the night after that. Crushed and giddy, I watched Shade's eyes and lips and listened to her tiny, delicate voice and the precise way she spoke. In the movie, Shade falls in love with a Mexican boy whose mother is deaf, and I figured my chances with her were increased, since my mom was deaf, too.

In the weeks and months that followed, my desire and longing for her dominated my being. My parents knew something weird had happened to me—they thought maybe I'd undergone a religious conversion since I'd mentioned visiting a mosque with a kid from my dorm. My friends thought I was 'shrooming all the time, though at that point I'd never even smoked weed. The truth was, I was seventeen years old, and I'd found the love of my life. It's been seventeen years since I came out of that theater, and I still compare every girl I meet to Shade.

Roughly three years later—December 3, 1995—at the campus computer center in Angell Hall, a few blocks from the Michigan Theater, I saw a girl sitting fifty feet from me, her boots tucked beneath her in her chair as she stared forlornly at the screen of her Mac, and I knew I'd found Shade at last. I gathered my courage and talked to her and got her name and phone number. This was Maggie Jones.

Maggie had a soft, haunted beauty. We'd lie in our own beds talking over the phone and fall into an intimate and binding silence for ten minutes at a time, watching the stars and the snow out our bedroom windows. Maggie sometimes spoke a sad, affectless sentence that sounded so much like Shade, I'd record it in my notebook. Here's one: "Trade what, bike for camera?" She'd indulge me when I asked her to repeat my favorite lines of Shade's from the movie, like, "Where'd you get those rocks?" Even Maggie had to marvel at how similar her voice was to Shade's.

Miraculously, she fell in love with me, and we had a year together that was entirely blissful, but things ended miserably. Mostly, I was too intense about my love for her, and Maggie seemed to recognize the slivers of my madness. "I'm just me," she said to me once, trying to get me to ease up. "I'm just a girl." Finally, during a year abroad in Scotland, Maggie met a French windmill repairman named Gilles and moved to France and eventually married him and had two daughters of her own.

In '99, driving with Eddie Faktorovich from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific, I crossed into New Mexico for the first time, and in the middle of the night, while Eddie slept in the passenger seat, I slid his green Oldsmobile off I-10 and found the ragged old truck stop

from *Gas, Food, Lodging* and the adjacent Desert Sky Café. Walking inside, I felt like I was returning to a place I'd visited only in a dream—this was, unbelievably, the same place Shade had been, and to me it was as holy as a cathedral. I sat at a booth in the corner and downed french toast and OJ, studying the place, lost in a quiet, trembling contemplation. Shade's absence tore at me, and I vowed that one day I would find her and bring her back here with me. I decided to never visit the place again alone.

A year later, still searching for Shade (among other things), I packed up my car and moved to New Mexico. I didn't know a soul in the whole damn state. I'd planned on moving to Deming, but on the drive from Chicago I detoured through northern New Mexico and swooned for the high desert mountains. I found a place to live outside of Taos in a little town called Valdez, and a few weeks later, at a rave in an abandoned barn, I met Bonnie Carpenter.

Bonnie was sweet and smart and pretty, and behind her friendly laugh was a troubled sadness that reminded me of Shade. She worked the reception desk at an old motel on Highway 2 and lived with her sister in an Earthship house made of rubber tires and mud out on the mesa, across the Rio Grande. Bonnie was from Jacksonville, Arkansas, and was a graduate of Arkansas State University's satellite campus in Beebe, where her dad was a professor; after college, she'd worked at a Planned Parenthood clinic in downtown Little Rock, an hour away. She'd also been hooked on crack and heroin for four years—her move to New Mexico was a shot at starting a new life and staying clean. We spent a few thrilling weeks together but again my intensity doomed things. Bonnie needed to focus on getting through each day without getting high, and it was a constant struggle—frightening, all-consuming, and hard for me to relate to. She didn't have enough energy left over to love me back with equal force. When I came back to town after a couple of weeks away, I found out she'd taken up with a guy from her meetings at Narcotics Anonymous, a skinny electrician named Cal. She married Cal a year later, and within two years they'd had their first child. By then I'd already moved back to Chicago and, after a year there, home to Michigan.

Over the years that followed, as I rambled around the country, I briefly wrapped my arms around other Shade-like girls—Liz in Plattsburgh, New York; LeBrie in Portland, Oregon; Lindsey in Houston—all of whom shared Shade's otherworldliness, bleak beauty, and abiding sadness, but they had all faded from me like morning mist. The problem, friends said, was with my ferocious, unshakable loyalty to the mystical idea of Shade. But this devotion, no matter how unproductive, unhealthy, or stark raving mad, felt spiritual and pure, and despite my loneliness I had little incentive to ditch something that had become so meaningful to me.

By the fall of 2003, eleven years had passed since I'd first seen Shade on the giant screen of the Michigan Theater, and still she was nowhere to be found. Some nights, if I was lucky, I'd dream of her, though waking up from those dreams only tripled my despair. Then one day, from out of nowhere, came Sarah Culklin.

Sarah lived in Tucson, three hours west of Deming. She was twenty-two, a senior at the University of Arizona, and she called to ask me a few questions about *Found* magazine for a piece she was writing for the *Daily Wildcat*. We were scheduled to talk for twenty minutes; the conversation lasted six hours. When we finally said good night, we'd already made plans to talk again the next night. I felt I'd found Shade at last.

Sarah's voice was angelic. Anytime she let out a tiny peep of laughter, I felt like I was soaring. That first week we talked every night from around midnight until the sun came up. I'd lie in my bed in the darkness, looking up at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling, Sarah's voice in my ear, and it was as though she was lying there with me. How do I describe the sweetness, nourishment, and ecstasy of those conversations? Our souls were lacing tight to each other—I was deep in it, swelled with hope and happiness.

We shared every strange, sad sub-chapter of our life stories and the minute details of each passing day. Sarah lived with her mom, a Wal-Mart clerk, and her mom's on-again, off-again boyfriend on the south side of Tucson. She worked at an animal hospital on the weekends, and was planning to go to grad school to study literature. One night she divulged a random fun fact: her first cousin was the actor Macaulay Culkin, star of the movie *Home Alone*, but she barely knew him, since he was from New York City, where her dad lived, and she'd only been there twice.

Another night her best friend, Ivy, took the phone—"Sarah's crazy about you," she whispered fiercely while Sarah was in the other room. "And she's so *hot!* You're a lucky guy." Our future gleamed with promise—she was not battling crack or heroin addictions; she had no interest in moving to France.

Before hanging up the phone each night, we began to say "I love you." It was thrilling to be in love, while so much of her remained a mystery, still to be discovered. My curiosity about her was insatiable, and learning about even her most ordinary likes and dislikes—food, movies, books—felt revelatory. Every day, I'd go through the routine motions of my life, getting work done, picking up groceries for my Grandma Bobbie across the street, just biding my time before Sarah's late-night call and the intoxicating ring and rhythm of her voice.

My friends thought I was crazy to be getting so involved with someone I'd never met in person. "You've never even seen a picture of her? Oh, her *friend* says she's hot? Yeah, 'hot' as Lyle Alzado!" Sarah knew what I looked like from pictures she'd seen online, but there were none posted of her. She offered to mail me a photo and I told her not to bother—I felt weird asking her to submit to that kind of superficial test. Of course I was curious, but my love for her felt more righteous for being based on who she was, not what she looked like, and I figured we'd see each other soon enough. Maybe a part of me also feared that a picture would pierce the illusion, that she wouldn't be as pretty as I'd imagined, but my friends' gentle harassment only served to inoculate me against any doubts I might've had.

Before long, talk turned to how and when and where we'd meet up. A plan was hatched—in a month and a half, once I finished putting together the new issue of *Found*, I'd fly to Tucson and we'd rent a car and hit the road for a week. I suggested a visit to my old stomping grounds in Valdez, New Mexico. Along the way, I figured, we could stop by the Desert Sky Café—me and Shade, together in Deming at last, everything wrapped full circle. (Though I'd shared other intimate aspects of myself with Sarah, I saw no reason to explain Shade to her, not yet—that kind of pressure had backfired in the past.)

We made other plans, too, beyond our road trip. The tone of these discussions was somewhat playful, but we both felt so profoundly confident that we'd found our soulmate, we considered every detail seriously. We talked about where we'd move once she graduated the following spring. Part of it depended on where Sarah got into grad school, though she was also considering taking a year off first, which we thought we might spend in San Francisco or even Santiago, Chile, where her friend Ivy wanted to study. We both wanted to have kids, but not for a while. She was cool with the name Orion, my favorite if we had a boy, and I liked the name Antonya, her pick if we had a girl.

Soon the day of my flight to Arizona arrived, and Mike Kozura dropped me off at the airport in Detroit. "Good luck, brother," he said, slapping two condoms into my hands—it was an ongoing joke between us, ever since we'd seen Dr. Dre hand off a slinky-like strip of condoms to Snoop Dogg in the "Gin and Juice" video, to pass each other condoms in random moments, especially in crowded places, at school, or at work, even in front of each other's grandparents—anywhere the embarrassment factor would be high. I slipped them into my back pocket and headed for the Southwest Airlines counter.

On my flight, in a hot, emotional daze, I stared out the window at the scrolling rectangles of corn and wheat across central Nebraska, far, far below. I thought back about all the wrong turns and rut-filled detours my search for love—for Shade—had taken me, and it was hard to believe that my journey was finally over, that when I got off the plane, she'd be there waiting for me.

My mom likes to tell the story of her grandfather, who came to live with her family when she was a teenager—he was in his eighties, and his wife had died a decade before. Her grandfather revealed to her that he had a girlfriend in New York City, a two hour train ride from Philadelphia. On Sunday mornings, he'd leave the house early, take the train to New York, and spend the afternoon with her walking in Central Park, then return home late in the evening, saying he'd been playing cards all day at a friend's house. He kept the girlfriend secret from my mom's parents—he didn't think they'd approve. Only my mom knew.

Then one morning my mom's grandfather told her that he was running off to New York to move in with his girlfriend and marry her. My mom helped him pack two bags with everything he'd need, and went with him to the train station and hugged him goodbye (but did not pass him condoms). She'd never seen her grandfather so happy. He waved to her from the window of the train, beaming, as it pulled away. Somewhere between Thirtieth Street Station in Philadelphia and New York, lost in a contented sleep, her grandfather passed away; the conductor found him when the train reached Penn Station. My mom's parents were furious when they learned that she'd been in on her grandfather's secret and had helped him pack his things that day. But she was unapologetic. "He couldn't have been any happier than he was on that train," she told them—and me, each time she repeats the story. "That's the best way you could leave this life: happy, hopeful, and headed for love."

Now I sometimes wonder: Was all my sweet anticipation on that three-hour Southwest flight the happiest I've ever been? Could I have guessed at all the fucked-up shit that was to come? I've often wished there was a way to freeze time, and that I'd known how to do it and had done it at thirty thousand feet above Nebraska—turned those three hours into thirty years, lolled for ages in that precious bath of hopefulness and light.

But nope, no luck there. A thick gray haze zipped the cornfields from sight, and ninety minutes later the plane dropped like a brick out of the clouds and screamed to a stop on the runway tar in Tucson, and I tramped up the jetway to meet my bride-to-be.

At baggage claim—our arranged meeting point—I collected my duffel bag quickly and retreated to a dark corner, scanning the crowd for Sarah. A part of me wanted to spot her before she found me so I could wade for a few seconds into that sensation of seeing her for the first time and gather myself before we engaged. I didn't know what she looked like or what she'd be wearing but felt sure I'd know who she was as soon as I laid eyes on her. But the passengers all dispersed and the luggage conveyor wound to a stop and still she hadn't appeared. Had I been stood up?

I felt a tap on the shoulder, and heard her breathe my name from behind: "Davy?"

I whipped around, and found myself facing a plain looking stranger—long, wavy hair, a wide face and upturned nose, a slanted smile. Who else could it be but her? Still, it took me a second and a half to realize that this was Sarah.

"Well," she said, with a cute, nervous shrug, stepping to me and putting her arms around me. I hugged her back, bummed that she wasn't as beautiful as I'd imagined, and disappointed that a moment which should have been deliriously happy instead felt a bit awkward and off-kilter. But in a way I'd prepared myself for this. I knew that once we met in the flesh, I'd have to start building things with the real person Sarah was and let go of the girl I'd been imagining her to be. Even as a frightening sense of doom flitted close, I did my best to scuttle it. After all, I was happy to be here, with this girl who loved me and was up for adventure. I broke the hug off and smiled and took another long look at her.

"What?" she said shyly, laughing her wonderful, recognizable laugh, but not quite meeting my gaze. "Am I pretty enough?"

"Of course!" I said, though I felt a bit wobbly and suddenly sacked with fatigue.

"Then let's get outta here," she said, taking my hand in hers. "The rental car place closes in an hour. New Mexico's waiting!"

Our plan was to hit the road before nightfall, after an early dinner with her mom and her friend Ivy. Sarah wanted to show me a place called Old Tucson—a sprawling, Old West movie set, featured in a half dozen classic Westerns, which had been abandoned for decades but renovated recently by the city as an entertainment center, concert venue, and Old West museum of sorts. For a three-dollar admission, you could have full run of the dusty streets, drink and play cards in the saloon, and fire off pop guns in the shooting gallery. The four of us ambled down the main drag, passing a few older fellows with silver mustaches, costumed in 1880s gunslinger garb, huddled in front of a building that said bank, twirling fake pistols, and taking turns at a real ATM. Next door, hitched to a post in front of the town's burger joint, a single emaciated pony flicked its tail at flies.

Inside, over hot wings, I chatted up Sarah's mom and Ivy, while Sarah disappeared into the bathroom and a piano with no piano player clattered a tune from the corner, its black and white keys dancing up and down as though tickled by a ghost. Sarah's mom had the gaunt, wrinkled look of a woman who'd lived a hard life in the desert and had disappointment on speed-dial. She was cordial but strangely uninquisitive—she didn't seem too concerned with who I was or the fact that her daughter was heading across state lines with a guy she'd met for the first time in person forty-five minutes before. Sarah had warned me that her mom would be preoccupied—her mom's boyfriend had moved out earlier in the week and hauled his stuff to a friend's house; this had happened

plenty of times before, apparently, but each time her mom took it as hard as a permanent breakup. The fact that she leaned so hard on Sarah when she took her lumps at work and in relationships had only made Sarah seem more Shadelike to me over the phone, but in *Gas, Food, Lodging*, everything eventually works out for Shade's mom and she finds a good man—Sarah's mom, sagging and deflated, seemed to inspire less hope.

Just to make conversation, perhaps, Ivy—nose-ringed, willowy-limbed, and about forty-four percent hotter than Sarah—pointed to a quarter-sheet flyer in the plastic stand at the center of the table. “Look,” she said idly, “Bubba Sparxxx is playing a show here to night.” A few times a month, I'd been told, the small rodeo arena at the back end of Old Tucson hosted local and national acts. She gave me a coquettish smile. “Hilarious. We should go!”

“Bubba who?” asked Sarah's mom.

I explained that Bubba Sparxxx was a white rapper from Georgia, kind of a southern-ified, XXXL-sized version of Eminem, but Sarah's mom had no idea what I was talking about. Then two things happened right around the same moment: Sarah emerged from the bathroom, looking a bit haggard, like maybe she'd just thrown up, and then a second later, surreally, as if cued by Ivy, Bubba Sparxxx himself—draped in a massive, shiny white sweatsuit and trailed by a crew of managers, bodyguards, and lesser-known rappers—blammed through the red swinging saloon doors and took a seat at a table in back, about thirty feet from us.

Sarah came back over and took a seat, and for the rest of the meal the four of us said little and mostly just watched Bubba and his friends, while at the same time pretending to be having our own conversation and not be watching them. Bubba had a natural boisterousness, and his voice boomed above the fray of voices at his table; we could make out the details of what food he ordered, how badly he wanted to give the Old Tucson shooting gallery a whirl, and which hot girls he half-knew in L.A. and was hoping to get on the guest list for their show there the following night.

“God, his music *sucks!*” Ivy whispered fiercely, and I jumped in to defend the guy, admitting that I had bought his first album and liked it, with the tacked-on justification that I always pulled for any small-town rapper who'd made it big. “Well, watch this,” she said, swiping the laminated Bubba Sparxxx postcard from its table display and getting to her feet.

“*Don't!*” cried Sarah, but Ivy was already heading over to Bubba's table. She went right up to him and asked for an autograph, and the hulking bodyguard-looking dude standing behind him produced a Sharpie, which Bubba nimbly took and used to quickly scrawl his name, all without ever looking at her. Then Ivy took a tiny glance our way, and for an instant before she looked back toward Bubba, her eyes met mine and flashed. She leaned in close and started murmuring in his ear. Bubba listened, nodded a few times, looked up at

her for the first time and smiled conspiratorially, and then gestured, Godfather-like, to the bodyguard who'd passed him the Sharpie. He said something softly to the guy, and before I knew what was happening, Bubba had stood and was headed our way, flanked by the bodyguard and two others. They crowded close to our table, as though Bubba Sparxxx was our waiter and the others were trainees.

“Are you Sarah?” he said, looking at her.

She turned bright red and made a squeaking noise, surprised and embarrassed.

“Well, your friend told me the story, and I just wanted to say hi and let you know how much we appreciate you making the trip down. Kansas City, that's like, what, a few days' fuckin' drive?” He glanced at Sarah's mom. “Pardon the language, ma'am.” Back to Sarah: “Our fans mean everything, you know, so this is . . . well it's the least we can do. Fellas?” With that, Bubba and two of the others launched into a half-baked and off-tune but enthusiastic version of “Happy Birthday to You” while the third answered a call on his cellie, saying, “Hold on a sec, we're singin' ‘Happy Birthday’ to some random chick,” and then watched the others warble to the end, shaking his head and laughing, without joining in.

Then they were gone, and Ivy was grinning around the table triumphantly while Sarah buried her head in her hands. I looked back and forth between them, and had a snap series of speculative insights about their relationship: Ivy was the more attractive and more outgoing one, but also more insecure. Again and again, over the years, whenever Sarah had a big crush on a boy, Ivy would flirt, charm, and dazzle her way in, until the guy took notice of Ivy and made a play for her, which, most of the time, she would deflect. If Sarah got upset with her, Ivy would plead innocence: “I can't help it if he likes me, and besides, I know you like him, I would never hook up with him!” It didn't mean Ivy was shady, and it didn't mean Sarah was weak—it was just the nature of certain friendships and the way of the world. I'd been in Sarah's position all through high school with Mike Kozura as Ivy. Hanging around Mike meant I'd have a chance to be around plenty of girls and take a charge at his leftovers. Any gentle rank-pulling on his part was just part of the deal.

This made me feel even worse about the fact that I was now hot for Ivy and whatever physical attraction I'd tried to fire up for Sarah was tailing away. But I couldn't help myself, and I bantered with Ivy while Sarah watched us through slit eyes, unimpressed. It was so fucked up—what about all those spiritual, late-night conversations with Sarah, and the potency of our love? Wasn't she supposed to be Shade? Only a soulless asshole would fly to Arizona so full of promises, then mack on a girl's best friend. I tried to beat back, or at least conceal, my traitorous impulses by resting an arm over Sarah's shoulders, but the move felt forced and awkward, and she stiffened under its weight. A minute later, she cut Ivy off mid-sentence and said to her tersely, “Hey, let's go have a smoke.”

“No thanks, I'm cool.” Ivy smiled back.

Sarah wordlessly snatched up her purse and headed for the saloon doors, and I felt a bit of evil relief that she seemed to blame Ivy, not me, for the direction things had taken.

The waiter came around and I ordered a Maker's on the rocks, even though it was barely five o'clock and Sarah's mom was sitting right there across from me with a scowl on her face. But Sarah's mom said, "I'll have one, too," and Ivy smiled and said, "Hell, make it three."

The drinks came, and I took a long sip, admiring Ivy's neck like a vampire. Then I turned to look out the front windows, and in the orange light of early evening I saw Sarah with her cigarette, leaning close to the skinny pony tied to its post and nuzzling it gently. There was something so sad and beautiful and lonely and Shade-like about her in that moment, I felt my heart swoop low. She also seemed to have purposefully placed herself in sight of us, and I knew that she was still sulking, but that all could be redeemed if I just went out there and talked to her for a couple of minutes about anything at all. Later, thinking back on it all, the fact that I didn't go to her then, that I kept sipping my drink—slouched, boiling, in my chair, half-listening to the end of a story one of Bubba's friends was telling about wrestling hogs—felt, strangely, like a greater betrayal than any of the larger betrayals to come. I watched Sarah as she teased her fingers through the pony's tangled mane, and had the thought, *Nobody can save anyone*, which was crushing, since all I wanted myself was to be saved. From Bubba's table behind me came a sudden explosion of thunderous laughter as his friend's story reached its payoff. The sound broke the spell over me and I jumped up, ready to rush out to Sarah and rescue her from the sadness of the world, but before I could take a step, she mashed her cigarette out against a *Frontiertown Gazette* newspaper box, flicked it away, rubbed her face for a second, and turned and headed back in.

Two hours later the sun had gone down and the last traces of daylight filled the sky to the west as me and Sarah rolled in our rental Ford Focus through the dead edges of town toward the I-10 entrance ramp. Our elaborate plan had already been set into motion, and there was no reason to call everything to a halt just because her friend had flirted with me and I was having a few doubts. Really, I was excited to hit the road. We'd dropped her mom off at home, and I'd had a chance to briefly meet her mom's boyfriend, Ray, who was sitting on their front porch when we got back from Old Tucson. He was wearing a nice suit but his face was sunburnt and dirty, giving him the vibe of a homeless guy at a job interview. I sat and talked with him about minor-league baseball while Sarah grabbed a few things from inside the house, and when we pulled away, I told her how he seemed like a good guy and she said, "I think he punched my mom last week and that's why she threw him out."

Sarah suggested we pick up some snacks before we got on the highway, so we bailed

into a strip mall off Speedway Avenue with a liquor store and a Subway.

Inside Subway, the glaring overhead fluorescents gave Sarah's face a drab shine, and I watched her order her sandwich: "Lettuce. Tomato. Spinach. Pickles. A little bit of mustard. That's good." I had a biographer's knowledge of the details of her life, but still couldn't get used to her physical self and the idea that this girl in front of me in line was now my new girlfriend. I wished that the Mexican girl behind the counter—green eyes and high, thin brows, maybe three years out of high school—was my girlfriend instead. She had a kind of sweet and gentle gloom, and as I absorbed her, a queasy stab of nervousness daggered my insides. I kept a distance from Sarah, trying to convey that although we'd come in together, we weren't, like, *together*.

I pulled out a twenty to pay for our subs and the condoms Mike Kozura had given me a few hours before flapped from my pocket and tumbled to the floor. "Oh, it's like that?" Sarah said, laughing, as I hurried to retrieve them. "Hot to trot? I thought you wanted to drive straight through the night, but I guess we should get a motel."

"That might be necessary," I said brightly, playing along, glad that the girl behind the counter had been distracted by the ding of the bread oven and hadn't noticed, while fully aware of how appallingly thin my loyalty to Sarah had become.

Me and Sarah went next door and grabbed a pint of Dewar's and two thirty-two-ounce bottles of Sol. What ever treachery she'd sensed in me at dinner in Old Tucson had been forgiven, and now, with her clothes and toiletries stuffed in a pink backpack in the trunk of the Ford, the gas tank topped off, and some decent liquor clanking inside the black plastic bag in her arms, she seemed a bit giddy and loosened, ready for a romantic vacation. Back in the car, I started the engine up, flipped on the radio, and found Sarah's hand squeezing my leg like a strange little crab. I looked up at her and saw her face coming closer to mine, and then we were kissing for the first time. Her lips were soft, and her tongue poked wetly into my mouth. It felt like kissing a total stranger, and there was something gross about it that at the same time turned me on. I cheated my eyes open and saw how full of feeling she was, and I remembered how important a kiss this was supposed to be—our first kiss, after two months of falling in love over the phone. I closed my eyes again, reached around her and pulled her into me, continuing the kiss, willing myself to love her as I'd loved her just hours earlier, on the flight out. But all I could think about were the odd mechanics of the kiss, her tongue flopping in my mouth like a minnow, the taste of cinnamon gum. On the radio, a guy from the BBC News was talking about the recent surprising advances in China's space program and whether or not this was a valid cause for concern. "Wait, hold on," I said, drifting back from the kiss and bumping up the volume, "I want to hear this for a second." I looked down and added, as though to further explain, "My friend's dad is writing a book on quasars"—a random lie which wouldn't have made any sense even if it had been

true. We sat there for thirty more seconds, both listening carefully to the end of the report, and then I leaned in and kissed her for another five or ten seconds, to sort of wrap things up after the interruption.

Sarah smiled. "To be continued?"

"Count on it," I said, coasting forward across the lot.

Inside Subway, the Mexican girl who'd dressed our subs was wiping down the counter with a blue sponge and singing to herself, draped in a kind of brave and naked mournfulness. My heart felt bent in half. I loved that girl more in that moment than I'd loved any girl ever.

We zoomed eastward on I-10 through the wasteland towns of Benson, Johnson, and Dagoon, Arizona. The road snaked up into low mountain forests, and then, once we'd pulled free of Willcox, dropped straight down to the desert floor. I cradled my beer in my lap, taking long sips and watching the mile markers tick down as we neared the New Mexico border. In the hot darkness, talking to Sarah, it was like we were on the phone again, and her tiny voice and sweet laugh summoned up an ounce of the excitement and swooning tenderness I'd felt for her over the past couple of months. But despite these dim-wattage currents—and as much as I genuinely liked her—it was as though a switch had been thrown the second she'd greeted me at baggage claim, and no matter how mightily I fought with the controls, I couldn't crank the switch back on.

I tried to fathom how my longing for her could so swiftly evaporate. It wasn't that her looks turned me off—true, she was no model or movie star, but she had a pleasant face and a likable smile. And her personality was essentially the same as it had been on the phone, if maybe a bit mopey and less confident. The frenzied, infatuated state I'd been in since the night of our first conversation was simply gone, and in its hangover wake I felt a sense of growing, anxious dread, which my beer eased a little but not enough.

Sarah had begun to explain an aspect of literary theory that she was studying, and I said "Yeah?" and "Really?" at the right times and asked follow-up questions with persuasive tones of engagement, though in truth I couldn't really give less of a fuck and was so caught up in the mystery of our troubling disconnection, I barely heard a word of what she was saying. Then she asked a question that broke through and got my full attention: "Davy, do you think we'll get married? Like, eventually?"

I paused, and then a strange, ambiguous croaking sound came out of me, like a bullfrog tuning its pipes.

She took hold of my arm with both hands and went on. "I mean, of course this probably sounds crazy, but here's the thing. You know how sick my grandma's been getting. I've always had such a special connection to her, and I know how much it would mean to her to see me get married." She shrugged apologetically. "I figure, you know, if me and you are gonna get married anyway, maybe we should do it in six months, while she's still alive, instead of in three years. Like next spring, after my graduation. It would make her *so* happy, and her being that happy, that'd make me so happy, too." When I responded with silence, she retreated a step or two. "If you think it's too soon, or too crazy, I totally understand. I don't want to put any pressure on you, I just . . . I don't know, part of me's like, what the hell, why not? Like, we might as well, you know?" I stared ahead at the ghostly silver twinkle of passing reflectors on the side of the road. "I really hope you can meet her soon," Sarah said.

"Yeah, me too," I said finally. I felt drugged, and a little buzzed from the beer, which was weird because I usually never felt any buzz from beer alone. "Maybe we can visit her at the end of the trip, when we get back to Tucson."

"That'd be awesome!" she said happily, popping her seat belt off and launching herself close to kiss me on the ear. "I was afraid you'd think I was insane or something."

I waved my hand and sagged away. By saying nothing, I knew I was only encouraging her mislaid faith in me, but how could I be honest and let her down so completely? Our trip had only just begun, and there was still a chance, perhaps, that the spark would return. It even occurred to me that maybe all of Sarah's marriage talk was her own way of pushing past any disenchantment she might've been feeling herself. The uneasiness boiling in my stomach was now a rising panic, but my body's response to panic was always to induce a sense of severe drowsiness and disorientation.

Sarah sat back, refastened her seat belt, clutched my hand in hers, and closed her eyes for a nap; she'd gotten up early that morning to give her mom a ride to work. "You need anything before I hit the hay?" she asked.

"No, I'm good. Actually, pass me the Dewar's, please."

"You sure you should be drinking and driving?"

"I'm not gonna get wasted, I just need to touch it to my lips for a second and wake the fuck up."

She cracked the bottle open and handed it to me for a couple of sips, then took a sip herself and slid it away under the seat. She leaned her seat back. "I love you," she said, beginning to drift off. I squeezed her hand.

Dreamily, she said, "This is maybe—no, definitely—the happiest day of my life. It almost seems too good to be true." And then she was asleep.

We passed an exit for San Simon, which put us about fifteen miles from New Mexico and just over an hour from Deming and the Desert Sky Café. As Sarah dozed, and I edged the Ford from eighty to eighty-five and then up to ninety miles an hour, I puzzled over how I might possibly escape this whole sad mess of my own design. Sarah wasn't crazy for bringing up marriage and saying "I love you"—I'd been the one to instigate that kind of talk over the phone, and had painted a beautiful, appealing fantasy that both of us had utterly bought into. But the fact that I'd believed as fully as Sarah in the shimmering vision of what was to come didn't let me off the hook. In the end, I was as much of a charlatan as any hustler peddling swampland to naive retirees, and when things came crashing down, as they were bound to very soon, Sarah was going to feel suckered and swindled, damaged and scraped clean.

The moon rose low in the sky, casting gray light over the flat, cracked rock sea that stretched from both sides of the highway as far as I could see to the horizon. Out here, in the country's emptiest corner, sometimes ten minutes went by without seeing another car heading in either direction. The overall effect was of driving on the moon itself.

I glanced over at Sarah. An eerie green glow from the dashboard dials spilled across her face. Her chin was tucked to her shoulder, turned slightly toward me, her mouth slack. She breathed slowly and easily, one hand on her knee, the other slipped down between her legs, pressed against the zipper of her jeans. A part of me wondered if maybe I could just suck it up and spend eight days with her, try to have a good time, see how things went. Who was to say how I'd feel once we had a little more time together? The strangeness of being on such an intimate journey with someone who felt so foreign might subside. But I knew I wasn't attracted to her, and our whole chemistry seemed off. The idea of having to fake it for another week filled me with a discomfort so deep it edged into terror. Then again, ending the trip early—and having to find a way to explain it to Sarah—felt too horrible to really contemplate. I banged once, hard, on the steering wheel, marveling at the trap I'd set for myself, and filled with painful exasperation. With no clear path at hand, all I could do was to simply keep driving.

Another few miles down the road, a small maroon sign flashed off the shoulder: *Now Leaving Arizona, Come Back Soon!* Two hundred yards farther down, a wide billboard loomed from the median dirt: *Welcome to NEW MEXICO, The Land of Enchantment.* We whooshed past, and I felt the border sweep over us like an invisible membrane as we entered my magic land. I thought of Shade, and longed desperately for her to be in the passenger seat of my car instead of this impostor.

I needed a cover story, it seemed to me, a way to end our trip that didn't feel personal. And the truth was, it wasn't personal, not exactly. It wasn't her fault that I'd built her up as

some kind of idealized soulmate. What I craved and had been chasing, again and again, for the past eleven years, I began to realize, was the exquisite misery I'd felt when I'd first seen Shade on the screen. That wrenching longing was its own perfect drug, and as long as a girl kept me at arm's length and maintained a distance, some veil of mystery—as Maggie and Bonnie and all of the others had, even when we'd come together—then my excruciating and exhilarating ache could be preserved. But when a girl threw open the gates and let me in, as Sarah had, no matter how charming, smart, and pretty they might be, the intensity would drain from me and I wouldn't be able to gas it out of there quickly enough and start my search for the next girl to call Shade.

Past tiny Steins, New Mexico, I began to see signs for motels and truck stops in Lordsburg and Deming. I knew I couldn't go as far as Deming, not with Sarah. But I didn't want to pull off the highway and turn around until I had a plan in place. Slowly, I pieced together what I would tell her. It hurt my heart to think about how she might respond—with anger, with grief, with shock? Sarah's face, dipped in moonlight, was so placid, her sleep so peaceful, I couldn't help but think of my mom's grandfather on the train to New York and his waiting bride. I hated myself for what I was about to do.

I resolved to get off I-10 at Lordsburg, but at the first exit I faltered at the last second and stayed headed east, and a mile later, at the next exit, I was boxed out by an enormous tractor trailer hauling a single ninety-foot windmill turbine blade that looked like a dragonfly wing made of metal. I braked hard but couldn't get over in time, and the pint of Dewar's shot out from beneath Sarah's seat and wedged itself against her left foot. There was no third exit, just an amber dusting of streetlights from Lordsburg's central square disappearing in the rearview mirror, and magnificent, sad, sacred Deming puffing heat from twenty miles ahead. I thought of my last visit to the Desert Sky Café, my promise to myself to return only with Shade. How many times since then had I dreamed of what that moment would be like? It was agonizing to be so close and yet so far away.

I wasn't even sure if there'd be another exit before Deming. I dropped my speed to sixty-five and started looking for a gravel turnaround with access to the westbound lanes. The Dewar's bottle at Sarah's feet made a sloshing sound as we coasted over breaks in the road, and I slipped off my seat belt and stretched my right hand toward it. If I was going to turn the car around and wake Sarah up and lay some bad news on her, I needed some scotch in me first.

I got my fingers around the bottle and plopped back into my seat, but just as I began to unscrew the cap, a dead horse-like beast, big as a Clydesdale, flashed suddenly into sight thirty feet in front of us, stretched on its side across both lanes. "Holy shit!" I cried, pounding the brakes and yanking the wheel hard to the left. We rocketed onto the left shoulder and into the hard dirt beyond, then fishtailed wildly and shot back onto the road. The bottle of

Dewar's had jumped from my hands and landed down by the pedals.

As I reached again for the bottle, Sarah bolted upright and shouted, "Watch out!" Ahead of us, in the same lane, was a car's entire steel fender and grille, massive as a canoe. I swerved hard to the right, almost lost control again, and finally came to a stop in the middle of the road. "Oh my God, what just happened?" Sarah said, frightened and full of alarm. "Are you okay? Wait, are you drunk?"

Adrenaline firing through me, I eased the Ford up a long, curving incline, past an old Chevy Cavalier parked on the shoulder with its hazards blinking and its windshield and front end completely demolished. I pulled in behind the rig with the gigantic turbine blade, which had stopped on the same shoulder a hundred yards in front of the Chevy. "I think someone hit a fucking unicorn!" I shouted. "Come on, let's make sure they're okay."

I leapt out of the car and saw a trucker in jeans and a T-shirt heading our way from the rig, swinging a flashlight. He called out, "You hit it?"

"Just missed it," I said.

He reached me and Sarah, who'd climbed outside and was rubbing her eyes. "Well, you guys're lucky," the trucker said. He was perhaps in his late forties, rail thin with an enormous shaggy beard. He waved his flashlight down the road. "I hope they ain't hurt too bad. Let's go see."

I trotted after him, pulse throbbing in my neck, Sarah just behind us. "What was it?" she peeped. "The animal."

"Elk," said the trucker.

The Chevy had apparently smashed into the thing dead on—its windshield was splintered into a thousand shards, and behind the wheel an old Native American man sat picking bits of glass from his face, blood spotted here and there, while in the passenger seat, a boy no older than twelve stared out at us in a daze. "I didn't even see it happen," he told us as we unclipped his seat belt and helped him out his side door. "I was sleeping. It was just, you know, *boom*." His eyes were wide with amazement. He ducked his head around and said something I couldn't understand to the old man in the driver's seat and the old man glanced at him and nodded and said a few words back. "My grandpa's okay," the boy said. "He's just upset about the car. He doesn't have insurance."

The trucker said to Sarah, "You got a phone? Stay here with these guys and call nine-one-one. They need a wrecker for sure, and maybe an ambulance." Then he pointed his flashlight down the slope toward the dead elk and said to me, "Come on, we need to get that thing out of the road."

We started down the shoulder, and in the moonlight I could make out the elk's giant black carcass as we closed to thirty yards. A pair of headlights rose into sight a half mile back, and the trucker pulled back. "This is a bad place to be," he said. "Wait a second." He

started frantically waving his flashlight at the oncoming car, but they kept hurtling toward us, only gaining speed, it seemed. At the last second, before crashing into the elk, they banked right, just clipping the thing, and roared directly toward us along the shoulder. I dashed down into the ditch while the trucker held his ground, swinging his light. The car whipped back into the right lane of the highway and went screaming past, nearly sideswiping the Chevy where Sarah stood talking into her phone, before shifting back to the left lane and disappearing out of sight up around a bend.

"Hey, get your ass back up here!" the trucker hollered to me.

"I don't want to get hit, dude," I called up.

"There's rattlers down there," he said. "For fuck's sake!" His voice was ragged with urgency; easily convinced, I galloped back up beside him.

Another pair of headlights was drawing near. Again, the trucker waved his light wildly, but this time it was a big white van, not easily maneuverable, and they broadsided the elk without even slowing down. There was a deafening crunch and a boom as the van lifted half a foot into the air and came slamming back to the pavement. For a moment, the van skidded toward me and the trucker sideways. Then it struck the Chevy's mangled, detached bumper, sending up a geyser of sparks, and spun off the far shoulder, coming to rest in the median.

People die all the time because they are in the wrong place at the wrong time, and standing on the side of the road while full-sized Dodge vans and Pontiac Chargers whirled this way and that was about as fucked up a place to be as I could imagine. I was scared shitless, my heart jangling in my chest like a dinner bell, but the trucker said with absolute calm, "Come on, no cars, let's roll," and in that moment I would've followed him through a firefight in Mogadishu rather than reveal myself to him as the coward I actually was.

We hurried down the middle of the highway and reached the huge, twisted hunk of metal that had been torn from the old man's Chevy. The trucker grabbed one side and I grabbed the other and we lugged it to the shoulder and heaved it far into the rocky ditch, where it crashed like a cymbal and clattered on down the hillside, presumably waking hundreds of rattlesnakes. We continued down the road, and as we got close to the animal itself, the air was filled with an overpowering barnyard stench.

The van's direct hit had sheared off the elk's back half and spewed pulverized pieces across fifty feet of pavement like lava from a volcano. Slippery innards were splashed everywhere and the road was black with blood—the smell stung my eyes and I was careful not to breathe in through my nose. The trucker booted what looked like a hoof out of his way and raced over to the elk's front half, and I came up fast behind him. Without hesitation, he took hold of one of the front legs; with sickened chills, but also a degree of morbid fascination, I took hold of the other. The animal was remarkably undamaged, at least its

head and front legs and shoulders, and its leg felt like what I imagined an elk's leg might feel like if the thing were alive—muscly, with a layer of coarse, fuzzy fur over an oily hide. Its eyes were open, its face stupid and blank. Me and the trucker both tugged as hard as we could, but the beast was heavy as a coffin filled with ice and only budged an inch. Then, from the darkness, two big guys materialized at our side, a father and son perhaps, who'd climbed from the destroyed white van. All four of us hauled together and the elk slowly moved with us across the asphalt, leaking guts and ribs from the seam in its belly. We kept straining backwards until we'd dragged the thing clear of the road and most of the way off the shoulder. "That's good," said the trucker. When we all let go of the legs, they kept their upward angle, which gave the elk the posed, oddly comical look of a man bowing to the floor and praising God.

The trucker laughed. "What a waste," he said. "If I had my pickup, I'd take that meat home." He looked at the father and son. "I feel bad, fellas. Another minute or two, we coulda had that thing outta your way. How's your vehicle?"

"Done for," said the burly dad, with matter-of-fact remorse.

"Damn." The trucker rubbed his head with his forearm. "Well, let's get the rest of it, too."

For the next couple of minutes, the four of us roamed the empty lanes, hurling chunks of elk off the road. I picked up a bloody, knotted leg, roped with veins and tendons, and foul, squishy organs, including one so nasty-smelling that I gagged and almost threw up. It was easily the grisliest task I'd ever been a part of, but in a weird way I was grateful to be picking up elk parts, instead of the grislier task of talking things out with Sarah. Finally, a couple of semis lit into existence at the bottom of the hill, and the trucker said, "That's probably good," and the four of us stood off to the side as they howled through. It was strange that all the sharp danger had drained from the scene so quickly, and left only a few unremarkable patches of roadkill blood.

The trucker and the father ambled along the median and got on the ground with flashlights to look at the underside of the totaled van, while the beefy son pulled out a gallon jug of water, splashed it over my hands, and passed me an old raggedy towel to dry them. I asked if they needed a ride or any more help, but they said they were cool, they'd call a friend with a tow truck in Deming, so I headed up the road toward Sarah and the wrecked Chevy. As I got closer, I could see the moonlit silhouettes of her and the little boy and dimly make out their voices, talking and laughing, and I felt a sudden gaping sadness open up inside of me.

"What's your boyfriend's name?" the boy was saying to her. From the darkness, Sarah replied with reverential softness, "His name is Davy."

Ten minutes later, we were back in our car, ready to drive on. I'd pulled off my shirt covered in elk blood, tossed it to the rattlers, and thrown on a fresh one, but my hands and elbows were still smeared with blood and instantly the new shirt had streaks of its own. My shoes, bloody on the soles, smelled like pig slop; luckily, as I took a few sips of Dewar's, its sweet pungency helped cancel out the odor.

I started the Ford, peered east toward Deming, and then, with a wave of guilty upset, pulled onto the road and swung a wide left, bumping across the sandy median and back onto the highway, pointed west. Sarah was too abuzz with all that had just happened to recognize that we were heading the wrong way. Her unsuspecting ease reminded me of a ladybug I'd lured into a pot as a kid before frying it with a magnifying glass. She filled me in on the Native American boy's story—he'd been living with his mom on an Air Force base in Twentynine Palms, California, but his mom had just been cycled into service in the Middle East, so his grandfather had picked him up the day before and was bringing him out to live in New Mexico. "I bet he'll always remember this night," she said. "God, that poor kid. I mean, his grandpa seemed nice enough, but a change like that's always hard."

We passed Lordsburg again. Sarah started laughing. "You really stink, you know. It's the elk. That is the weirdest smell. But, I don't know, there's something kind of manly about such, you know, hands-on work. I like that you're not afraid to get dirty. You're like one of the whalers in *Moby-Dick*." The dashboard clock read midnight.

Our headlights danced across a small roadside sign: SAN SIMON, AZ 22; TUCSON 168. I saw Sarah take notice of it and sit up a little, and my stomach swished in slow, cramped circles, like an eel in a goldfish bowl. "Wait a second," she said, "I think that sign said Tucson. Are we going the right way?"

I gripped the wheel, suddenly choked up. My plan was all set to go, but its irreversibility was chilling. Once I launched into it, I'd have to see it all the way through. It wasn't too late to change my mind—I could still act like I'd made a mistake and turn back around. But I pictured myself in an hour at the Desert Sky Café with Sarah and knew that would be far worse for both of us. The only thing less kind than what I was about to do would be to drag it out over the course of several days. Better to tear a bandage right off than to rip it off slow. I hardened myself, trying to work up the necessary coldness to do the deed.

"Yeah, and there's an I-10 West sign," Sarah said. "I think we turned around twice or something?" She looked over at me, and our eyes caught, and in that tiny moment I think she understood what was happening. A quiet shock registered in her face, and somehow, once that first dart had pierced her, I felt free to follow with a hundred more.

"I've got something really terrible to tell you," I said, my voice starting to break. "I am so, so sorry. I can't believe I'm doing this to you." And suddenly the long, complicated lie I'd

dreamed up began to pour out of me. I told her I'd had a longtime girlfriend named Liz who I'd loved more than anything, but who'd struggled with drugs and mental problems until our relationship had dissolved. Just recently, I explained, in the past couple of weeks, Liz had come back into my life, and we'd decided to try to get back together. I should have said something before coming to Arizona, I told Sarah, but the reunion with Liz had happened so suddenly, I hadn't known what to do. Now, though, I saw that I had to get home to her. I assured Sarah that my fondness for her was very real, but also that I knew this wasn't our time and that I couldn't in good conscience continue the trip. I could just as easily have tried a more honest approach, but I didn't fully understand what I was feeling myself, and I was afraid Sarah would think that any missing spark was a sign of shortcomings on her end, instead of my own, and that the rejection would bear a more bitter sting. Besides, the heart of the story was true—there'd been a girl named Liz, the one from Plattsburgh, New York, and I'd been devastated when things with her fell apart. Had she wanted to get back together, I would've jumped at the chance. But I hadn't heard from her in over two years. As I yammered on, I pretended to cry and then found myself really crying. Up ahead, a pair of signs coiled from the sand, thanking us for visiting New Mexico and welcoming us to Arizona.

If Sarah had grown angry and started calling me names or had burst into dramatic sobs, it might have been easier. But she just cried very softly for a minute or two, covering her face with her hands, and then with her thumbs she rubbed the tears from her eyes and stared quietly ahead into the desert night. I kept apologizing and sniffing and sputtering until at last she said, "Stop saying you're sorry. It's my fault, too. I should've never believed that this kind of thing could happen."

"No," I protested. "You have to believe. These things do happen. Magic can happen." But I knew I didn't really have any right to be making that particular case to her. "Just not this time, or not right now."

"Whatever." Her face crumpled into a crying face but she wouldn't seem to let herself cry.

Something about the way she was blaming herself and trying to bury her sadness broke me. I burned in hot self-hatred, wondering how I could ever forgive myself for so casually inflicting such pain, while at the same time selfishly worrying that I would always be this alone, unless I could track down the Mexican girl I'd seen at the Subway in Tucson. For the next hour, we didn't say a word to each other. A couple of times, Sarah broke down in tears for a bit and then steadied herself. She leaned her face to her window for minutes at a time, looking into the endless dark, and then sat back, watching the hood gobble up each white, stubby dash painted along the center of the road. Time moved very slowly, and each mile seemed to last an hour or a week or a year. Only the towns whirling back past us—San Simon, Dragoon, Johnson—revealed that the car was actually moving.

In Benson, I stopped to fill up on gas, and when I went inside to pay, I ducked into the

bathroom and tried again to scrub the elk blood from my hands, mostly in vain. I grabbed a Milky Way bar for Sarah, which she'd mentioned in one of our early conversations was her favorite. We got on the highway, headed west still, and strangely we began to chat about not much at all, amicably, as though nothing had happened. The breakup and tears had brought us somehow closer together or at least removed the weight of expectations I couldn't fulfill, and the next forty-five minutes passed quickly as we reveled in each other's easygoing company. Soon Tucson's orange-y glow filled the night sky, and Sarah got quiet again and said, "Not this exit, but the one after this."

She guided me through her ghost-town neighborhood back to her mom's house, and when we reached her street she said, "Just pull over here." I cut the engine and killed the lights. "Look at that," Sarah said. She pointed all the way down to the end of the block, where her mom's boyfriend, Ray, sat on their front porch, twitching a bit under the white chute of a single streetlamp, like a man on the stage of an empty auditorium.

"That's weird," I said.

She sighed. "That's just Ray." Then, a second later, she'd squeezed onto my lap and we were kissing fiercely. Her lips moved to my chin, down my neck, and after a minute she pulled up my shirt and started kissing my chest. With one hand, she traced along the insides of my thighs, slowly up, and I felt myself getting hard. The possibility seemed to teeter before us to have sex right there in the car. I was in such a daze, and so lost and warped from the past twelve hours and our queer round-trip, I might have simply gone for it. But from nowhere, a fat gray cat dropped onto the hood of the car with a loud, clanging thud and crouched at the base of the windshield, tossing its tail back and forth and sizzling us with a freaky death stare. Sarah laughed a sad, shy laugh. I reached for the keys from the ignition. "Let me get your stuff out of the trunk," I said.

"Do you want to sleep here tonight?" Sarah said. "We've got a sofa I can give you."

"I think I'm just going to cruise around, find a café."

"God," she said, "I don't know how I'm going to tell my mom about this. I've been talking about you nonstop for the past six weeks. I feel totally lame."

"Me, too. The same."

We bailed outside and I opened the trunk and handed over her pink backpack. We held each other for a bit and kissed again. I felt connected to her in a way I'd never quite felt connected to any of the Shade girls I'd been involved with over the years, like she'd seen me at my ugliest and basest and most plain but still thought I was an okay guy. Her forgiveness and compassion struck me as incredibly generous and nothing but genuine. "I am so happy that I know you and that you came into my life," I told her, trying to keep grateful tears from sprouting up. "I'm sorry I fucked this all up so bad, but I hope you know how much you mean to me, and that I really do love you."

"I love you, too," she said, taking a sharp breath. "Call me when you need me." She spun and walked toward her house without looking back.

I climbed into the car and watched her go. When she reached her front porch, she said hi to Ray, and slipped through the front door. I sat there for another few minutes, looking at Ray, looking at the gray cat on the hood, and flipping for no reason through the sports pages of a *USA Today* I'd picked up on the plane, like I was on a stakeout. Finally, Ray stretched and stood and went inside, and I started up the car, swung it through a clumsy fourpoint turn in the street, and headed once more for Deming.

Before I got back on I-10, I had one stop to make—the Subway off Speedway Avenue. By now it was almost three in the morning and the lot was dark. In front of the liquor store next door, a man was passed out next to a slew of empty bottles, draped in a chopped square of old carpet.

I ripped a sheet of paper from a notebook and began a note to the Mexican girl who'd been working behind the counter earlier in the night. I knew I was crazy—at the peak of my dementedness, really, my hands spotted with dried elk blood—but I also longed for the girl desperately, and it seemed to me that if this whole sad affair with Sarah had led me, ultimately, to my sweet Subway angel, and things worked out for us, then the universe might still have a logic to it and not simply be a place of chaos and meaninglessness, as I was beginning to fear.

When I was done with the note, I read it through, amazed that I could author something so bizarre and creepy that was at the same time so hopeful and honest:

To the girl with green eyes who was working to night (you also had silver-hoop earrings)—my name is Davy, I came into Subway around 8:00 to night with my friend Sarah. (I had a brown hat and a black T-shirt that said WCBN. Sarah was the one who asked you which bread was the freshest and gave you a hard time because she didn't think the bread you gave her was fresh enough.) Anyway, I thought you were beautiful and I wish there was a chance we could get to know each other. I don't even live in Tucson, I live in Michigan, but if you ever feel like talking on the phone sometime or even want to write me an e-mail or send letters back and forth, I would really love it. I'm not a weirdo or anything, just someone who trusts deeply in intuition. I hope to hear from you sometime! All my info is below. Love and Respect—Davy

I climbed from the Ford and walked over to the door of the Subway, looking for the best place to tuck the note and trying to decide if I should actually leave it. I could imagine the endless ribbing the girl might get for it from her coworkers. And the chances of her actually responding seemed remote. Then again, the chances of her calling or writing to me if I didn't leave the note were even less, so really I had nothing to lose. Still, as badly as I ached for her, I wasn't so crazy as to miss the irony of the situation and my own manic tilt—I'd ditched one Shade candidate and inside ten minutes was trying to break through to the next. A lonely feeling wobbled me, and I stood there rereading the note again, sacked by a sudden hopelessness.

The man wrapped in carpet coughed and groaned in his sleep, and in my moment of self-pity it seemed that very little separated the two of us. It was easy to envision that one day soon I'd be rolled up in a carpet of my own. At last, I went ahead and slid my note through the Subway door, jumped back into the Ford, and hit the highway, pointed east.

Quickly, the lights of Tucson faded and the mountains swallowed me up. A piece of downtrodden jazz came through the radio, a fluttering signal from a station in Bisbee. Two hundred miles in front of me, the Desert Sky Café sang its siren song. All of my senses felt heightened, and I welled up with crisscrossing currents of emotion, relieved to be on my own again, inside the familiar soreness of my longing for Shade and away from the messy scramble of actual interaction with a girl. My aloneness felt holy and pure, proper for a pilgrimage. The moon settled behind a bank of low clouds and a million or so stars tumbled into sight.

Through the darkest part of the night, the same small desert towns I'd passed twice already scrolled past a third time. It felt like I'd spent lifetimes driving this same stretch of road. There were no other cars for miles at a time. Odd, mournful memories scudded in like fist-sized meteorites—standing at the end of the North Avenue Pier at midnight, overlooking downtown Chicago and Lake Michigan, a hot wind in my face; a man with a hook for a hand I'd picked up hitchhiking in Lafayette, Louisiana, and delivered to his estranged daughter's house in Lake Charles; the old Scottish woman who'd tried to comfort me as I cried on the bus from Edinburgh back to London the night Maggie Jones broke up with me. Soon a great weariness began to blanket me. All I wanted was to pull into Deming, coast over to Shade's house, climb into bed beside her, and kiss her hair and the back of her neck as she slept, then hold her through the night.

Past Exit 1, I pulled over to the left-hand shoulder to take a leak, and found myself looking up at the giant *Welcome to NEW MEXICO* sign and a packed zoo of constellations beyond, stepping from the sky. I entered a kind of waking dream, high off the majesty of the stars, and floated there in the desert cool for what might have been five minutes or an hour, soaking up the glorious night. Gentle cyclones stirred through, carrying the taste of sage

and piñon pine. Animals in the far, far distance cawed, hooted, and mewled.

Finally, I lashed back into the Ford and pressed on into New Mexico. I cycled through a hot triptych of feelings—joyous, sad, and lonesome. I felt Shade's presence so near, it was strange to consider that I'd flown down from Michigan to travel with Sarah, not with Shade. Past Lordsburg, I dully registered the wash of my brights on the dead elk's carcass at the side of the road, and the Jackson Pollock-like tangle of brown blood and entrails across both lanes, already faded.

One at a time, the stars snuffed themselves out, and the sky ahead pooled from black to deep blue with the first hint of dawn. Tiny houses and ramshackle trailers dotted each desert crest, marking the outskirts of Deming. Five minutes later, I bent right off I-10 onto the service drive, and after coasting through a few sets of lights the truck stop rose into view, a couple of rigs arranged side by side in the lot, the Desert Sky Café glowing in the middle under a pair of streetlamps, one pink and one orange.

Before I went in, I sat in the car for a bit, misty-eyed, heart ablaze. A low, sustained foghorn hum buzzed through my whole body, like I was still in motion. I'd sworn not to return to this spot without Shade, but here I was, without Shade. Without Shade, I was completely hollowed out and done for. Without Shade, I felt I might crumble to dust. But fuck it, first I'd get breakfast.

Forty minutes later, I finished telling my story to the waitress and she was disappointingly—almost comically—unmoved. She'd never seen or heard of *Gas, Food, Lodging*, didn't have a daughter named Shade, and was nearing the end of a double shift. She peeled some Wet-Naps from a shelf under the register and passed them over. "There's a john through the kitchen," she said. "Go on and wash up. But if you don't mind, let me cash you out first."

In a dirty sink in back, I rubbed the last dried traces of blood from my hands and forearms. I decided not to stay in Deming to try and find my soulmate, who was a character from a movie, but instead to head on to Albuquerque—if I made good time, I'd be there by noon, and could crash out on my friend's sofa while he was at work.

Outside, in the bright morning sun, I popped the Ford's trunk, tried to douse the dead elk's per sis tent stench with a fresh swath of deodorant, and started to change my shirt once more, when a state trooper's black SUV crawled into the lot and came to a stop right behind me, pinning me in. An older man, Hispanic, tall and broad-shouldered, in a brown uniform and black boots, stepped out and walked cautiously over, surveying me closely.

"Good morning," he said, hand at his hip.

"Good morning," I said.

"Getting cleaned up?"

"Yeah."

He moved closer. "What you got on that shirt?"

"Blood. I was clearing some roadkill off the interstate."

"That's what you told Carol, huh?" He nodded toward the diner. Apparently, the waitress had put in a call. My drawn-out story must have sounded insane to her—how was she to know the difference between elk blood and human blood? Also, I supposed asking her to break a hundred-dollar bill might not have been the best idea. Spattered in blood, flashing C-notes, it must have seemed like I'd robbed a stagecoach. "Can I see some ID?" the trooper asked. I handed over my driver's license, and he said, "You mind sitting in my vehicle while I run this?"

"I guess not." He gave me a quick check for any weapons, led me to the back of his SUV, and I climbed inside. Somehow the pain I'd inflicted on Sarah earlier in the night felt linked to this police action, which muffled any resistance I might otherwise have had. The cop shut the door, walked around to the driver's seat, protected by a thick pane of wire and Plexiglas, and called my info in over his radio. Now that I was safely in his custody, he seemed to relax a bit, and introduced himself as Officer Maez. He asked me to repeat the story I'd told the waitress, and I found myself recounting the whole weird journey my long night had become, explaining the reasons I'd come through town in the first place—Sarah, Shade, the whole enchilada. He listened with thoughtful care, raising his eyebrows, shaking his head, and occasionally chuckling at appropriate moments. He told me he knew *Gas, Food, Lodging* inside and out; he'd even been an extra in a scene filmed inside the diner. After the complete disinterest of the waitress at the Desert Sky, it was nice to open myself to someone as curious and attentive as Officer Maez.

His radio came to life and he exchanged a few words with someone at HQ. Then he told me, "Sorry, this could take a few more minutes. We run everything twice—Border Patrol has its own database. Got to run the plates, too."

We kept talking. Maez turned out to be kind of a sweetheart—he owned a bean farm with his wife, he told me, and wrote poetry sometimes in a little notebook when work was slow. At last, he eyed me in the rearview mirror. "I understand about Shade," he said. "I get it. I used to be like you. Chasing phantoms." He laughed and rubbed at his graying temples.

"So what'd you do?"

"I married my best friend. Rhonda." He pulled out his wallet and dug through for a photo, then pushed it against the glass, upside down. "That's Rhonda."

"She's pretty."

"Yeah, she can be mean when she wants to be, but she's a good one. I got lucky." His radio crackled to life, and after a minute he said, "Okay, looks like we're all set here. Thanks for your patience." He stepped out and opened my door. Then, once he'd passed my license

back, he looked me over and rubbed at his chin. “You know, come to think of it,” he said, “there was a girl named Shade who used to live right here in town.”

This sideswiped me. “*What? Where is she?*”

Maez explained the story. When Rhonda’s youngest daughter was in high school, she’d had a friend named Evangeline, and after *Gas, Food, Lodging* was filmed in Deming and the movie landed in theaters, Rhonda’s daughter and the rest of their friends had started calling Evangeline “Shade” because she looked so much like her and had so many similar interests and just seemed to share her very essence. She’d even washed dishes at the café for a couple of years in high school.

Naturally, my heart was on fire. “What’s her last name?” I asked Maez. “Where can I find her?”

“Well,” he said cryptically, “I’ll show you something.” He marched me back into the Desert Sky Café, and deep in the rear corner, between a pay phone and a dusty pinball machine, he pointed out a small plaque on the wall, with a picture of a beautiful, dark-haired girl at the top and an inscribed gold plate below:

EVANGELINE ‘SHADE’ CHRISTIE

§

June 19, 1977 – December 30, 1999

§

‘I think of you as watching from a time and space beyond the sky, a place where we might someday come’

§

‘Earth has no sorrow that heaven cannot heal’

“Sorry,” Maez said softly. “I just thought you might want to see that.”

I felt a gulf of sadness open up in my chest. “How’d she die?” I asked him.

“Had a wreck on Highway 26, out toward Rincon. They added a traffic light there. A little late, though.” He seemed to gauge how affected I was, and rested a hand on my shoulder.

Was Shade Christie the Shade I’d always been searching for? Maybe. Probably. Who knows? I’ve learned more about her, and everything I learn about her makes me think that yes, I would have been crazy about her—I would have married her—I would have loved her for a thousand years. But who knows how she would’ve felt about me? She’d had a boyfriend anyway, a fairly serious one. If she hadn’t died, she probably would have ended up marrying him.

What kills me sometimes is the knowledge that she was there in Deming, still alive, the first time I visited, on my road trip with Eddie in the spring of ‘99. Some nights I think about Shade Christie, haunted by the thought that I could’ve found her and we could’ve been together, if only I’d stayed in Deming and told Eddie to continue out to California without me.

These days, it still happens from time to time—I’ll get bowled over by a dizzying love for a girl I’ve only glimpsed: the bartender with tattoos on her neck who fills in some nights at the 8-Ball Saloon, just down the street from my house; a Denny’s waitress in Wheeling, West Virginia, working a mop and bucket in back when her shift is through; a girl with pink hair on the Greyhound bus from Chicago to Detroit, wearing two hoodies and listening to headphones, writing in a journal, taking long sad looks out the window at the passing scenery. Once, I would have tried to talk to each of these girls, made contact in some way, hoping to break through and build something, the way I’d left a note for the girl who worked at that Subway in Tucson. But after the night of the elk, the long drive with Sarah Culkin, and the next morning at the Desert Sky with Officer Maez, that was it for me and Shade. I’ll always love her more than anything, and I can’t help but size up any girl I hang out with and compare her to Shade, but there’s nothing much to be gained by continuing the quest. I won’t find Shade in this lifetime. Shade is dead.

That morning, after spending some time with Shade Christie’s memorial plaque, I headed back out to the parking lot with Officer Maez when he tapped my arm and pointed at something. I followed his gaze and saw, perched on a rusty post twenty feet away, a strange and beautiful owl staring back at me with whirling eyes, tender and probing. In my billowing sadness, just beginning to understand that I would never hold Shade in my arms, I had the odd but persuasive thought that Shade had died and come back to Earth in the form of this owl. I’ll always remember the way that owl looked at me.

Davy Rothbart is an author, the editor of Found Magazine, and an Emmy Award-winning filmmaker from Ann Arbor, Michigan. This short story is reprinted with the permission of the author and publishers.

About The Transfer

Gas, Food Lodging is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with 2.0 stereo sound. The HD master was provided by Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.

Production Credits

Discs and Booklet Produced by Kevin Lambert and Francesco Simeoni

Technical Producer James White

QC Manager Nora Mehenni

QC Alan Simmons

Authoring & Subtitling The Engine House Media Services

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