



**Bad Voodoo: a true story about hitching a ride to New
Orleans**
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“Before we get goin’, you two got any guns or weapons? You do, I need you to stash ‘em in the back there, underneath the carpet next to the wheel well... Agreed?”

The Wench and I had been sweating buckets, under the shade of a New Mexico overpass. Both of us in full Renaissance Faire garb. After all, one needs to be highly conspicuous when trying to hitchhike [illegally] on a 70 mph highway. But we are whimsical people. Someone will stop, we were confident about that. I had been waving my staff-of-many-colors... yet semis kept trundling past, blasting past obliviously. One after the other after the other.

Our sign read: New Orleans or Nearest Party. I think it’s a damn noble cause, since, heck, we had been stranded for over thirty days in Albuquerque’s brown, dusty suburbs with no transportation. We had severe cabin fever, let me tell you.

Finally a squeal of tires! As we now waddle with backpacks overflowing toward the white suburban, all I can think is “Wheels! Yes! This is like getting beamed up by a UFO!”

And so our transcontinental ride begins. Any place is better than here. Now the dice are rolling again, thanks to this short fellow who has rescued us aging teenagers. Our rail-thin driver, Al, pulls back out into traffic.

Of course we’ve got no ‘weapons’! We are poets, artists, lovers, documenters of the subconscious. We are magical Brits, aliens, fashion statements in all our splendid regalia.

Al is a regular guy hunched over the wheel, beady-eyed, soft-spoken, knuckles white. He’s sitting on a cushion to raise up his eye level. Plain T-shirt, shorts, no socks. Al is all-American and not quick to conversation, as it turns out.

“I got to be real careful not to get pulled over,” he eventually explains. “See, I’m drivin’ with no insurance. That’s what happens when your ex-wife takes your Lumina (which was our other car) over the edge of a freeway on-ramp, & lands it on top of a kid in the car below.”

Tragic. An \$8 million wrongful death lawsuit. The papers all have Al’s name on them too, of course.

“I ain’t payin’ those kind of premiums. No, thanks. I’ll just take my chances.”

Deep down, it’s all just what he should have expected from the bitch.

Al's forehead is deeply furrowed with worry lines. Years in the sales force. He drives, following the straight lines on the map.

"I keeps driving from state to state. A new state every few days. I never stop moving," he says. Excepting for those rare pauses, those moments of tranquility when he's mountain biking, far off-road, when he stops to breathe in the majesty of canyon walls and huge skies. "Far, far away from everybody..."

I fancy myself a kind of roving shrink. And I'm thinking that, much more than a captive audience, what this chap really could use is some THERAPY. That quiet black cloud of serious gloom I see above Al's head, I wonder if it's permanent? He's a plum case alright, all bottled up, and I'm not one to recoil from a good challenge. God must have put us in this particular vehicle for a reason, right?

I roll up my sleeves. I wink at the Wench. Isn't this the kind of unusual experience we wanted? Human contact? Dramas, en route to some fabulous New Orleans party?

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Somewhere in the western wastelands of Texas, Al interrupts the bleak scenery to get some gas.

"Hey, would you guys mind picking up the first tank?"

"Sure, I guess. No problem," I answer. The Wench and I are on the strictest of budget limitations, but one tank of gas shouldn't hurt.

Al hails from Colorado. He organizes contractors and monitors landscaping crews for Target stores. In some way I don't capisce, he has a government contract. But I do understand that Al is en route to Florida, so today must surely be our lucky day! How about that, Wench? He can give us a ride all the way to New Orleans! No scrambling, no begging, no twiddling thumbs on the gravel shoulder feeling like fried bananas under the scorching sun.

He has a nice vehicle, too. A/C and all. I kick back, riding shotgun. Only slightly worried about what other firearms Al might have stashed under the carpeted wheel well.

I have found that people deal with alienation in different ways. Some paper over it and pretend to be ultra-normal. Some play it up. Some wallow endlessly in their own isolation...

I recall a sweet couple from San Francisco. We had crashed with them several weeks earlier. The smiley wife was busy creating various alien-themed paraphernalia. Alien T-shirts, UFO candleholders, E.T.

pamphlets, an alien website. She said that her admitted obsession stemmed from her personal abduction experiences.

Her ultra-logical husband, a tall, gangly and mild-mannered fellow, well, he didn't know what to make of it all. He humored her and offered her words of encouragement, but when he came home from work he would avoid her and settle in behind his electric guitar for hours and hours until it was bedtime.

They barely had sex anymore. She was trapped in their marriage. She was a furnace of energy, a dynamo ready to explode! Couldn't he see? Except her body had blimped out over the years, blocking his view of her enthusiasm...And since his own sexual drive had apparently gone limp, something strange had rushed in to fill the marital void.

Aliens.

But it was just a metaphor, really, don't you see? Subconsciously, she wanted her husband to desire her again, to notice the 'alienation' that was growing between them. How locked out of his world she was. If only he would grab her, overpower her, break her iron will, blow her mind. Passionately abduct her! Prod her with strange devices! Just do anything illogical and unpredictable! For once. Then she'd have the proof that he still loved her.

On the other hand, there are those who relish their alienation and begin to live out a myth of extravagant abnormality. The Wench and I, for example, are working on this neo-Renaissance thing...

"Sure you don't want something to eat, Al? You never get hungry?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Y'all go on in. I'm fine. Really."

That's what he's been saying at every pit stop. We get the feeling Al is also trying to minimize his expenses. In fact, I'll wager he is as broke in his pricey Toyota 4-runner as we are on foot.

He does pop out regularly to use phone booths, however. Hmmm. To call whom? We don't know. He doesn't tell us (at first). Instead, he borrows quarters, and sulks.

In Al's squinty mind's eye, a web of paranoid conspiracies is continually swirling. It clicks into focus for a while, dissolves, then creeps up on him again.

I love the show! It's fascinating. Let's rewind his tape by seventy two hours:

1) He claims he pulled off-road back in Colorado to go mountain biking.

2) He had returned to his vehicle to discover that he had left the sun-roof gaping wide open.

3) His suburban had been pretty much cleaned out. His laptop, diskettes, business records, camping gear and supplies were gone.

4) Also missing: \$300,000 in unsigned banker's checks. His savings!

Well, that sounded unlikely but it certainly would explain his bleak mood.

"I had been riding high in the saddle," Al says, "Been saving up for that big day when I could go grab me some real estate a stone's throw from my daddy's spread down in South Miami. Hell, I'd been all set to ride back into town, like a real player. Like a hotshot. Ready to pay cash on the barrel for that property. That would sure show 'em! Then I wouldn't be jes' a black sheep. The prodigal son. I could've earned some respect from my brother and sisters who all gone on to be doctors and lawyers."

Except he hadn't ever got around to signing the damn checks.

"What an idiot," they will say instead, "What a fucking moron."

His pops will be harsh, ruthless. He will roll his eyes as if this was just so typical but no one should expect more from such a loser as this son of his.

More than that even, Al has blown it with himself. What recriminations will the mirror hold for him over the coming years? Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the biggest loser of them all?

The Wench has been monitoring this unfolding tale of woe. She rolls her eyes at me, as in: why do the losers always find us? There's always someone nearby to unload all their shit on us...

After our cramped night at a truck stop, Al decides to get an early start.

"...Sarah's the only other person who could possibly have known where I was! She must have had me tailed. She probably got her new asshole of a boyfriend to tail me. I mean, who else would want my business records? And you know what? That explains why they ain't answering their phone. They're in it together. They gotta be... Plus I got all my stuff still stuck in storage down in her basement. All my stuff!" He

pauses as yet another penny drops. “She pretty much hates me, ya know.”

I’m not getting any takers for my theory: that perhaps it was merely a crime of opportunity, a whim. Some fellow mountain biker who just couldn’t resist the open sun roof... Nope. Al’s not listening. No sir, it’s all part of an ever-widening grand conspiracy from hell.

“So why does your ex-wife hate you so much?” I ask.

He seems about to reveal something, but instead he says: “We-e-ell, it’s a long story.” Unlike his other stories? “She’s the only woman I’d ever been with. We got ourselves hitched real young. I was 16.” Out comes the obligatory wallet snapshot. “Hey, check it out, this is her, right here. That’s Sara.”

Sara is at the center of his conspiracy theory.

She is somehow preventing him from accessing his personal secretary, the one who has his ATM card for safe-keeping. Unless, God forbid, the secretary is also in on this massive double-cross! Oh my Lord: they’re ALL in on it! They’re all sabotaging his lifelines, those malicious bastards and bitches, just turning his life into a tottering house of cards.

Revenge, revenge is on his mind—but how?

While Al is cooking up dark fantasies of turning the tables on this cabal, my Wench is pondering the merits of getting out of this Toyota sooner rather than later.

Don’t get me wrong! Al is totally cordial with us. Out of principle, I work to talk him out of multiple homicide. He appreciates my efforts, or so it would appear. I manage to change the subject. I sketch out for him some of my own creative projects. He breaks into smiles.

“You two. You’re like angels or somethin’. I don’t know why you’ve come into my life,” he admits, “All your creativity and all? I don’t really get much of it, but I just feel like I wanna be able to help you guys out.”

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Soon we are drifting down Aisle 3 of a Target store, wrapped in sanitized muzak, strolling past camping gear. He’s determined to buy us a pup tent. Al keeps raving about how helpful we are. It’s like he’s never run into honest people before.

“I’ve been thinking,” Al continues. “My Dad, he’s an investor, you know the type. Piles of money, got his own jet and that kind of thing.

Well, I happen to know that he invested in some art stuff before now. It could just work.”

The Wench catches her breath! He continues: “I’m gonna set you two up with him. A face-to-face meeting kind of thing.”

Woohoo! Now that would be a real windfall!

“Plus I gotta get you kids some proper sleeping bags. Y’all go ahead and pick a couple out. Don’t you worry, it’s on the government account number. I’ll be over there in the bike center.”

He’s gone off to replace his stolen bicycle. (I don’t understand where the other bike went. I thought he said he was riding it when the suburb-an got burgled... I prudently don’t mention this flaw in his story.)

Al is trying to disguise his newest fear. Sara, the ex-wife, will try to spend down this Target government account before he can. This account is his one and only lifeline, you see. He wouldn’t put it past her, either. Oh, the ramifications!...

Al is developing a dry cough. An ak-ak. It nervously precedes each sentence. I hope it’s not contagious, because my own immune system is just recovering from a long bout of bronchitis. Months long. The very last thing I need is a relapse.

Come on, I reprimand myself. Let’s not focus on worst-case scenarios! Focus on this Miami Sugardaddy instead! What on earth are we going to hit him up for, Wench?

Al stops. We are near Dallas/Fort Worth. He’s pulled over in some carefully manicured suburbs next to a perfectly landscaped pond. He and I stretch our limbs and go for a stroll.

He talks of guilt. She was only thirteen, after all.

I’m dragging ever more of his dark baggage out into the merciful light of day, unburdening his soul like a father confessor.

He admits she wasn’t properly trained. He should never have let her get on the snowmobile that day. He didn’t... if only... his daughter wouldn’t have been... if only, if only...

Somehow I manage to talk our melancholy pilot back down, to slow his tape loop of frenzied grief. Accidents happen. I tell him to put his crucifix down now.

“She is not coming back, you must let her go now. You can’t change the past, but you can change today.” He starts to babble on auto-pilot again.

“Forgive yourself, Al.” I interrupt persistently. “There’s nothing you could have done. Forgive yourself, Al, it’s the only way now. Let it go.”

I seem to be getting through. And each time I crowbar another dark shame out of his closet, he feels better. Noticeably lighter.

Soon we are winding around backstreets, laughing, looking for that main drag once more. I pat myself on the back. I do enjoy the process. I like to fix things.

How are we going to fix the financial dilemma, though? The Wench and I, we are the hitchhikers. Our goal was not to spend money on travel.

Al spots the next Target. This store is his only meal ticket. It’s his next straw to clutch. He leaves us waiting in the parking lot for twenty minutes.

Somewhere behind the freshly pruned junipers, behind the sliding glass doors, Al is grinding his teeth. Next to him are his two shopping carts. They are both piled high with Target-abilia. But the store manager has just refused Al’s account. The manager is unmovable. NO NO NO.

Al is humiliated, furious. He’s flushing beet red...yet he has no other way to pay. He storms back out towards us, empty-handed.

And all my soothing wisdom is swept right out the window.

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Aggravation, frustration, silence and whiter knuckles wrap around the steering wheel.

The Wench suggests that I could treat Al to a meal at a Vietnamese restaurant we just passed. Seems Al has wolfed down McRoadfood his whole life. He’s never once bothered to experiment with anything different.

“Shoot, I don’t know about no Viet food,” he mumbles skeptically.

After the noodle soup festival, his eyes have grown as wide and watery as a child blessed with love for the first time. He is all gratitude! He had no idea food could taste that incredible!

The Wench and I smile knowingly at each other. It’s so easy being an angel! Just rip away their blinders and seize control (in a good way.)

Back on the road to New Orleans, I plop a cassette into the car stereo; it’s Turkish music. Al is flabbergasted. It’s so... beautiful. It’s so... sad and so... alien.

South of the Dallas megalopolis, we decide to forego the lure of Six Flags Amusement Park. We head straight for a quality campground instead.

A cuttingly cold wind comes howling across the lake there. Through some gnarled gray trees, we spy an odd anaconda of orange pontoons snaking along the periphery of the swimming area. It's far too chilly to go for a dip, though.

"Wanna go exploring, son? Take the new bike! Go on with ya!" offers Al.

The virgin 15-speeder feels great. I hit the local trails like a kid. I am exhilarated on this new Xmas toy! Up and down ravines I fly. I soar across flowery meadows, quite giddy with delight.

After an hour and a half, I roll right over a large hawthorn spike.

It was hard to see in the grasses! Psssssst, sighs the front tire, like there was some big secret it had for me...

It's no secret that I'm miles from our car, without a repair kit. Now I'll have to walk this useless toy all the way home! Fuck it! I just wanted to have fun already! Was that too much to ask? 'OR NEAREST PARTY', remember?

I promenade the disabled contraption up a seemingly endless side road. The sun is vanishing, and the temp is dropping fast. Next to the entrance tollbooth, there's a commotion. A pretty young lady is pulling her hair out, she's losing her shit. Her car hood is agape, jumpstart cables are splayed everywhere. All available hands are pushing.

Tough. I trudge right past her problems. I've got my own troubles.

"Texas redheads, lemme tell ya. They'll fuck ya raw seven ways to Sunday. Ain't nothin' like 'em."

Al didn't take the bicycle flat personally, thank goodness. But out on the highway the next day, Mr. Hyde is seizing control of the wheel from Dr. Jekyll.

Al has this other personality in there, and its cobra hood is spreading. He's spitting poison with a snicker. Seems he's got some "niggers" to cuss out. A few "cunts" to ravage.

I wonder if all my liberation counseling might have pried the top off of his Pandora's box...

"Yep. They'll drain yer balls dry like a goddamn milking machine."

This from a shy Catholic guy who never stepped a foot out of line in his life?

I try to remain non-judgmental. We don't want to get dumped out on the concrete shoulder just yet. Rides sure seem to be scarce in Texas, I mean, we never pass any other hitchhikers. Not even one.

The Wench chuckles cheerlessly. Al is devolving into a full-fledged redneck, right before our very eyes. Still, I can see that it's only suppressed rage trying to find the escape valve. He's just testing his new freedom wings. We shall have to bite our lip until New Orleans.

The Big Easy! I'm planning to change my name there! A new identity, that would be fun. Play music, get famous, get fans, make an impact, that's my plan.

So, next attraction? Wacko, Texas. That's this afternoon's pit-stop. It should be spelled W A C O. But Wacko seems so much more appropriate today. I can feel the soul of David Koresh hovering nearby, observing us from another dimension, laughing as our van full of loonies pulls over to park in the campground.

The Wench and I gladly slip off for a splash-about in the pool. Unfortunately, the highway roar is annoyingly present.

Al is in collection agent mode. He's gone to call "his people, who ain't being straight with him." The veins in his forehead are throbbing ominously this afternoon.

Are any of these calls real? The Wench is more cynical than I—she thinks he's faking them all. Who knows? All we've got is second hand information, so we can't triangulate the truth. Our money situation is not looking good, since I'm already carrying the Wench. Something has to give. Soon.

"I cain't be workin' for my Dad. Nuh uh. Nope."

"What? He offered you a job managing his Aspen resort, and you turned it down?" I sputter through a mouthful of hotdog. "Are you nuts, Al?"

"Pshhhaw... Have him tellin' me to do this and do that all day long? Bossin' me round?" He meditates on his burger. "Nope. You don't know this guy," he adds, nodding smugly like he had wrestled with Satan himself.

"Dude, you HAVE to rethink your whole strategy here. When did he make you this offer?"

“A few months back.”

“Al, do you have any other alternatives left? You’ve GOT to make peace with your father. Forget about all that revenge crap, that’s all in the past. Here’s something to actually look forward to, don’t you think? You need to sit in the saddle and start facing forwards! Call your Dad. Say, hey, pops, I’d like to talk about that offer again. I’m ready to consider it now.”

But Al is worse than a mule. “Cain’t do it.”

It’s time to go for the jugular. “Well, Al, I can’t be paying your way from here on out, my man. I just can’t.”

Al pauses and peers up through the locust tree leaves. The sunlight is speckling the picnic table. He measures his next words carefully.

“You two been real good to me. I know you didn’t ask for none of this. Hey, I can jes’ let you off here. You wanna get off here?”

“Er- um...” I try to sneak a glance over at the Wench, but she is annoyingly inscrutable when she wants to be.

“Shoot,” he continues. “I gave you my word that I’d get you both to New Orleans, and I am good for that. Fer real. I swear. I swear I’m a-gonna do it!”

Do it on my tab, I add under my breath.

No way around it, though because he’s hitching off of us as much as we’re hitching off of him! It’s equitable in a sorry ass way.

Quick scrimmage. Let’s just get to New Orleans already, eh Wench? We’re nearly there, after all. Just hang in there.

Following more debate, Al begins to come around, to soften... Maybe he’s not completely powerless. Perhaps there are a few shots he can call with his Dad. Salary, for example. I get him to envision all the possibilities in detail. What’s an Aspen manager’s life actually like? Could he negotiate a salary with his dad?

“Think it through, Al...”

I can’t help musing back on my own family. My own dealings with the Patriarchy. The father figure always has exorbitant expectations. Do these not cast a chilly shadow across the path of a prodigal son? Pop looms, there, on the horizon, straddling all roadways like some Colossus of Rhodes. Like a cold, shrewd Shane saying I TOLD YOU SO, while exerting that gravitational pressure of family expectation. The same pressure that is sucking Al back in, into the family corral, back into an

inevitable Miami Showdown. But this battle will be on Dad's home turf, too...

"Trust in the future," I intone cheerfully. Little do I know what's about to happen.

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Late in the evening, Al's cough is worsening. It's turning into a major chest cold. Oh no. Bronchitis: the dreaded B word! His body must be reacting in dismay to this latest turn of events. At having to be prematurely abased in front of the family Judge/Executioner.

Still, he has one tantalizing piece of good news: he got through to his dad, and it just so happens (through Extraordinary Serendipity) that "My Dad is flying into New Orleans this weekend on business!"

HA! What are the chances of that?

"And Dad says it'll be no problem at all to squeeze in some time for the odd couple." For us two hitchhiking anachronisms!

The Wench and I fall out. We are beside ourselves! We're deliriously delighted by this ray of financial hope! A possible windfall? Oh God, could this be our Hollywood ending? We're cynical, though. So many flowerbeds pining for the waters of wise investment. We have so, so many projects just yearning to be anointed with the chrism of cash. But still. Could this be the manna from heaven that we've prayed for? Could it? A financier who actually believes in ART? Oh ple-e-ase!

During the night, the Wench has a vivid dream. She's in the ocean, knee-deep in waves, unperturbed, while lightning forks are smashing into the sea all around her.

(Maybe this means she's not properly grounded?)

Anyway, the Waco Renaissance Faire is directly across the freeway from the campground! Al, hacking away, summons up a modicum of excitement.

"Let's go take ourselves a look-see. You guys already dressed up like you belong here!"

The car trail is ragged, thank goodness we're in a 4-wheel drive. The long service road into the Faire grounds passes one hippy tent after another. There's trailers hung with awnings, cabins by dry creek beds, a few car wrecks, piles of trash ... and unexpectedly suspicious stares. Small town stares.

I wave back, but my heart is sinking. To these folk, we are aliens. Just gawking tourists.

I spot a guitar propped up against a log.

“Stop!” I command. “That’s the ticket.” I’ll just whip out my finger picking skills. It is guaranteed to work among these hippie types. Nothing like a little jam to help break the ice, right?

But on closer inspection, the guitar is missing some strings. The chap who emerges from the tent behind it hardly seems in the mood for no banter. He gives us suspected thieves the old, traditional Oregon welcome. You know: GO AWAY.

I’ll tell you what sucks. Being Renaissance artists who can’t even fit in with a Renaissance Faire.

Perhaps we’re just fakers.

We’re not Renaissance players, really. We’re just unemployed aliens trying desperately to get assimilated here, there, somewhere, anywhere! Chameleons who now must mimic the local customs until we can begin a new life... The time for sticking out like sore thumbs is over. It’s time to try to fit in.

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Austin sounds nice. Austin is not far. And we don’t have disposable cash to dilly-dally with. We have to press onwards to the fabulous new beginning that (we hope) awaits us in New Orleans!

“I got this aunt down in Houston, ya know.” I can hear Al’s mental gears grinding. “I think she’ll spot me a few. I gotta be fixin’ the front axle on this thing.”

Oh dear. I hope it didn’t get cracked on that bumpy back road into the Ren Faire.

Soon we are meandering around, lost. We’re somewhere in the industrial outskirts of east Houston. Nowhere to pitch camp amid all the factories.

Eventually we turn off a road, onto a smaller road, onto a teeny dirt track that peters out in front of some half-built bungalows, way, way out in the swamp...

The site is long abandoned. It’s a nice grassy area, though. It’s secluded. It’s free. The sun sets and we’re all exhausted. I start unrolling our new sleeping bags.

The Wench wanders over to examine a wooden sign that's off in one corner of the grass. The sign is upside down, its paint faded. It's almost illegible really, but you can just about make out these words:

DON'T FEED THE GATORS.

We're out of there in a mad dash! Back in the industrial zone, we thankfully stumble across a gator-free motel. Well, more of a cockroach motel really. It's owned and run by a couple of Asians who are severely impaired in the English language.

\$10 a night. We can just about swing it. One room, please.

Praise the Lord, it's got a mattress and a box spring. Yippee! Relief for the Wench's sore back muscles.

Al vanishes, probably off to Target and his auntie's.

So we unload everything and take stock. We have a mattress, a dirty sink, and a promising future! That's right! Mr. Miami Moneybags is going to meet us personally! How can we help but jump around on our grungy cockroach motel bed trampoline! We're like 4 years old again! Yippee! Boingy boingy boingy boingy boingy boingy.

Al pokes his head back in our door at 8 p.m., armed with Ruffles and pretzels and sodas. All this health food is for us, cuz he's thoughtful like that.

"Oh yeah and I got one more surprise for you all." A present, just like he promised. He drags us outside to look.

There's an 8-person tent strapped to the roof of the Toyota. A \$300 purchase from Target. I guess his ex hadn't yet spent down the account all the way.

"What's with the tent, Al?"

"It's for you guys!"

"Oh really. It's kind of, um, huge, don't you think?"

"Naw, you're definitely goin' to be needin' it once you git down to New Orleans. Trust me."

"I don't—"

"Oh sure. You'll be pitched out back of somebody's house. Yup, you're gonna need it alright."

"Thanks, Al. You know we can't accept it, really. I mean, you already bought us the pup tent, remember? That's more than big enough for the two of us. But we do appreciate the sentiment."

I hate to rain on his parade. I hate to ruin this, the one gift with which he feels he can repay his two guardian angels.

But he's not upset this evening. Something's different with Al. The Wench notices it also. Good God, he's actually smiling! He's in a great mood! Carefree! How could this be?

There's been a lot of developments in 2 hours, so he fills us in:

The aunt thing didn't work out. She's a conservative Houstonite. The moment he walked through her front door, she started to rip him a new asshole for screwing up his marriage to such a lovely Catholic girl. Moreover, her guest bedrooms are already being used by 4 rather homely exchange students from the USSR. (No Texan redheads there.) Within 15 minutes, Al's had enough of her berating, and he slams the door behind him. Fuck her!

His dad has fortunately wired him a little cash, enough to repair the axle. Plus enough to get him his own room for the night. Poppa of course had ripped him a third asshole! Regarding the unsigned banker's checks, etc.

However, Al will be hooking up with some cool cousin of his later on tonight. That's why he's all smiles. He's going to catch the midnight ballgame! Share a couple of brewskis. Relax a bit. (Looks like the Wench and I shall get some quality time alone...) He'll retrieve us in the morning.

"Okay, y'all have a good one!"

We place bets on whether Al is actually going to come back or not. Surprisingly, it almost doesn't matter. We feel ecstatic! We get some privacy, at long last. Let's get naked! I make love to the Wench...

There are some naughty shenanigans also going on in room 7, right across the parking lot. Through our Venetian blinds, we can almost see! I wonder if this is one of those motels you can rent by the hour? Ah, who cares, Wench, keep sucking!

And later, we pass out and slip into hopeful unconscious-ness, dreaming of that real, real, real good time we are going to have down in the Big Easy.

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There's a BANG BANG BANG on our motel door.

I sit up with a start. What? It's not even morning. It's not even... what the hell time is it? Midnight? We're not allowed any visitors after 7 p.m.

“Open up, it’s me, Al!”

“But we thought...”

“Hurry UP!” he yells.

The Wench unlatches the brass chain and he barges in. She rubs her eyes. “What’s—”

“No time to explain, pack all the stuff. Now. We gotta go.”

“Right this minute?” she mumbles groggily.

“NOW” he orders. He’s all fidgets and panics, like a fox just ahead of the hounds. “NOW!” he barks again.

With a bad attitude, we pack. The tiny Asian manageress emerges from her apartment into the motel parking lot to see what’s causing the loud fuss.

Al points an accusatory finger at her, hollering: “Hey, you! Yeah you! It was you, right? ”

She is dumbfounded. “You no stay?”

“You called the cops, didn’t you? Yeah, you right there, I’m talking to you! You squealed, huh? You called the cops?”

“You want I call da cops?”

And so on.

Soon our peaceful snooze is just a memory. The highways are empty at this hour. But Al’s still paranoid. He’s twitchy. He’s in car chase mode, one eye glued to the rear view mirror, just waiting for the flashing red lights that he knows are always following him.

Apparently, Houston’s finest have given him exactly 3 hours. Three hours, this morning, to haul his dumb ass out of the state of Texas, and to not come back agin’.

And (although it’s not like we’re even asking) the latest Al story unfurls along a lonely east Texas highway:

It all started under a neon sign that read ‘Liquor, Beer and Wine’. That hardly seems surprising. Al’s not much of an alcohol drinker, remember? But everyone has to cut loose once in their lifetime.

So he and his cousin were kicking it in the suburban. Parked in a lot in front of his swanky hotel. Poppa’s favorite Houston stopover. \$85 a night! Al was probably thinking God owed him one by now, after all that shit he just went through back in Colorado. Time to cash in some chips, baby!

So there he and his cuz were, Budweisers in hand, twelve pack on the carpet, radio on. They were laughing and catching up and getting a nice beer buzz on.

But lo and behold: who should appear sashaying up the steps of the hotel but a sweet, young, nubile—you guessed it—Texas redhead.

She started to sway toward the red-carpet lobby.

Al went into an altered state. Texas redheads! Holy mother of God!

He gunned the motor, slammed it into gear, peeled out, burning a bunch of rubber. He said “Watch this” to his cousin.

Al careened around to the foot of the hotel stairs amid a piggish squeal. He jammed on the brakes like he was in the movies, reached across his stunned cousin to grab the car papers out of the glove compartment. He quickly wound down his window and started wagging the papers at that fine-ass Texan redhead.

He started yelling: “HEY SWEETHEART, I JUST WANT ONE NIGHT WITH YOU, SEE THIS, IT’S THE DEED TO THISSY HERE CAR, I’M TELLIN’ YA, ONE NIGHT WITH YOU AND THIS HERE CAR IS AS GOOD AS YOURS!”

It might have been funny in a Porky’s kind of way. However, the redhead decided it was more creepy than funny. She edged her way nervously backwards into the lobby and disappeared.

10 minutes and a few miles later, the cops had Al spread-eagled up against his Toyota.

They couldn’t care less that he had open alcoholic beverages in the vehicle. After all, anybody can drive drunk in Texas! But they did care about them Colorado plates. Those made him pretty suspect. Colorado? That made him damn near an illegal alien in these here parts.

And that wasn’t the worst of it...

No insurance, no insurance, no insurance! What the hell were you thinkin’, son? Bail for the dern ferner is set at \$1500. Which is of course about \$1500 more than Al’s got on him.

They let the cousin go home.

Oh the humiliation!! Al most now call his poppa. Again. Barely four hours after that last reluctant, groveling phone call.

Hi, Dad, this is King Fuck-Up-Of-The-Family calling back, and I’ve got some more bad news... Pops will be raging! Pops will be livid! Pops will

eventually bail him out, but his memory will be long. (This will not be a good night to negotiate Al's Aspen salary.)

* * * * *

5 a.m. Deep in the Bayou now. The sign to a certain Beauregard Campsite beckons us. We've escaped from the hell of Texas. Al is hacking and wheezing more and more. I am coughing too, even despite my internal mantra: 'I am Immune'.

We find a spot. I pop the little tent in a surreal daze. Al slumps into the rear seat of the Toyota. He does not wish to disturb our sleep with his coughing. He really is a gentleman. And a redneck. Which one will claim final possession of his soul? It's a fascinating struggle.

We are all numb from fatigue.

I've barely closed my eyes when the campsite manager forces us to pack up again. He makes us move across the field to a different spot.

The Wench starts eyeballing the 8-person tent. Heck, we've got it, we may as well just set it up. Must remember to seal the window flaps with the waterproofing spray tomorrow...

8 a.m. Al has by now deduced that he and he alone brought the red-head nightmare upon himself. It wasn't the fault of the tiny Asian woman, or anyone else.

It's kind of funny though. The one time in his life he actually let his guard down, tried to really let loose, what happened? Bammo. Instant karma. Straight to jail. Do not pass go.

It's a Catholic thing.

Al has a confession to make to us this morning, whether we want to listen or not: "I can unnerstand that you guys probably don't trust me after all this. But I gotta tell ya. I been honest about everything. Everything except for one thing. I need to let you know this, alright?"

Phew it's getting hot. The temp is soaring along with the humidity. Well-rested people are rising for their morning coffee all around us.

Al adds: "I lied about one thing. And I'm real sorry I did."

There's no reaction from either the Wench or me. Should we act surprised? Should we take guesses?

"I lied about why my ex-wife hates me so much. It's coz I wasn't completely faithful to her. That's the real reason why my aunt was so mad at me. See, there was this other woman... Her name is Sara, too. Weird thing, that. And I loved her a lot, too. Anyway, last year? We were sorta

seein' each other on the down low, and this one time we decided to go all the way and make love? Well, the condom broke. It just broke. She got pregnant... Then she threatened to tell my wife. She said I had to leave my wife and be with her, to be a good Daddy to my kid."

Al's eyes mist over after another coughing fit. "Sure enough, my wife found out everything. She filed divorce papers and took my ass to the cleaners." He paused. "There. Now you know. That's why my family is all over my case so hard. And that's the only lie I told you. I swear. I just wanted to let you know that."

If it wasn't for bad luck, Al just wouldn't have no luck at all! I hope he's happy to get that adulterous confession off his chest at last. Talk about instant karma.

Finally, we get some long, long overdue sleep.

And somewhere out in the land of Nod, the Wench receives a dream message that Al should place a call to his older sister. The Wench is woo-woo like that, extracting bits of info out of the ethers.

It's hard for me to believe, but Al says he has received the exact same message in his dreams, too! It's obviously a SIGN.

Supernaturally bonded, he and the Wench drive off into town just before noon to do some grocery shopping. Despite the sticky heat, I doze off again inside the big tent. I am snuggled up, laying on top of my new sleeping bag.

I think it is the rising waters that alert me.

The Louisiana sky has opened up! The deluge is upon me! Every window and door flap is wide open.

I can't think straight. I'm too tired to process that this is actually happening. I'm like the sorcerer's apprentice, trying to zip flap A to zipper B but it's caught in flap C. Goddamn but it's a tropical monsoon! It's torrential! The whole campsite is sinking back into the swamp.

Al's white suburban abruptly roars up.

"Let's get the fuck out of here!" he hollers.

The tent! We have to roll the whole icky thing up—canvas, water, poles, mud—into one huge Drake's Yodel and tie it onto the roof of the car.

We climb in, sopping, sniffing, coughing, hacking, wheezing. There is nothing to dry ourselves on. Why? Well, ironically, we had hung out all our towels on tree branches—to dry out. Ha ha ha.

Al's sister was not home in Iowa. And his father was not at home in Miami.

"No one's answering. The machines ain't picking up neither."

Al finds that unthinkable, dang near impossible. His recent smile is waning under the effort to come up with an explanation.

The rain curtains down relentlessly. Al kills some time at the wheel by describing his Mom. She plays classical and jazz guitar, has a number of them in fact. She sounds as hip as his father sounds mercenary. It's as if ART and BUSINESS got married.

I can almost picture his parents together. He says that they recently converted an Eagle tour bus. It's parked out on their lawn right now. They've pushed up the interior for vacationing around the States. A lounge-mobile, if you will, not dissimilar to what famous stage acts might use on tour.

It would be such a comfortable shelter for the Wench and I to chill in while waiting for an interview with the Big Man...

But the Wench has a private question for me. "Does it even exist, this Eagle? Does any of this pie in the sky even exist?"

And I have no answer for her.

At the next payphone, far down the Gulf causeway, Al jumps back in out of the rain with... more bad news. It's his mom. She's had a massive stroke. The whole family is already flying in to Miami. His sister has already flown out from Iowa: that's why no-one was picking up! His father has just got back home himself.

Poppa is still furious with Al, of course. Al's been told to haul ass down to Miami as fast as he can.

"But Pop, what about meeting these two people with me? The creative angels?"

"Yeah. Well, that's gonna have to be here in Miami, at some point down the line. Once things have simmered back to normal, because obviously things are pretty hairy right now. Meantime you get yer sorry ass down here already. Your Mom needs you."

* * * * *

Rain, dark, miserable rain... it's an evil omen. There's bad voodoo in the air. Something is repelling us from the Big Easy. I can feel it. I can smell it.

We're being dragged 180 degrees in the wrong direction from the NEAREST PARTY.

The air is humid, dank and foreboding. There will be no commercial breaks in this car. There is precious little breathing room. The mood among us is bleak, horrible, doomed. Nobody even wants to chat anymore. We are powerless to resist the terrible tide of events!

The Wench and I both have the urge to cry. Everything is slipping through our paralyzed fingers. There will be no meeting with the Art Financier after all... on Bourbon Street... or Miami either at this rate!

I watch the New Orleans exits flash by our windows. I can barely move my mouth. Everything is futile. How are we going to find the strength to get out of a car in the monsoon and start life afresh? How are we going to see this drama out, right to the credits?

"It's OK," coughs Al. "You can pitch your tent out on my Dad's lawn. It overlooks the ocean. Then you won't be underfoot until this has all blown over." He falls silent, somber, wrinkled up like a Pomeranian.

A few hours blur past. We're nearing the Alabama state line, and the rain is finally easing up a notch.

I get an idea. "Hey, Al! Let's hit this airport right here in Mobile." I spread the map between us while the Toyota bounces along the causeway. "Look, just over here."

My pointing finger swims around the target location. "That could work. You get your Dad to front you a plane ticket, you could even arrive in Miami by tonight! We could go ahead and drive your car on through to Miami for you. My driver's license is good!"

Al coughs and mulls over the offer.

"We're trustworthy!" I add—I hope unnecessarily. I mean, if we haven't proved our honesty by now, what would it take?

Then again, who would lend his last expensive possession to two strangers in exchange for a promise? After losing everything else?

Still, these are desperate times, and it seems like the only option that makes any sense to me. While he and I debate the terms, we manage to get lost again. We are on Mobile Island, that's certain. Al sees a 7-11.

"Let me call home from there."

We watch Al lean into the booth. We observe as he his lips move against the receiver, as his expression changes, as a shockwave hits him.

As he lets go his grip, as the phone receiver drops in slow motion.

As the gray plastic and the spiral metal lifeline bounces and twists until it dangles motionless in the rain.

We watch as Al buries his forehead in his hand.

The minutes pass. He lifts his eyes again to the North like a dark warrior. The tears come pouring down his cheeks mixed with raindrops, for the tragedy has deepened into the unthinkable. He climbs in the car.

“My Mom didn’t make it.”

Al’s hard-ass salesman mask has cracked apart. He moans. His shell-shocked sobbing is killing me. He is too distraught to drive.

We put him in the back seat so he can keep crying in that mannish-boy way, cry and cough his lungs into exhaustion.

“We’re really sorry, Al.”

“And I never got to see her! I never got to say goodbye! I’m the only one in the family who didn’t get to say goodbye...”

“We’re really sorry.”

“Oh, puh-lease, it ain’t like it’s your fault (ak ak)”

* * * * *

The Wench has commandeered the bridge now. She acts decisively. She is the strongest one still standing, therefore she seizes the helm.

Like Al, I am busy coughing my lungs up.

And yet, here we are suddenly in the middle of the most amazing sunset. A huge orange and fuscia memorial has exploded all across the Alabama sky.

“Look,” I whisper to Al, “This sunset is for your momma. Here, go get a shot of it.”

I make the Wench pull over onto the shoulder of the bridge. I get him to clamber out, in a zombie daze, to click off a Kodak moment, and crawl back in.

That was cold of me, I think to myself. But he will thank me later. I just wish one of us were riding off into that sunset right about now, to wrap up this movie with a happy Hollywood ending.

Al’s now dealing with Mom slipped through his fingers and Dad still furious with him.

His father had told him, “Well, son, it don’t make sense no more to rush down here. The family is going to have to start making funeral arrangements. You get here when you can. And NO, I ain’t sending you no

more money, and NO, I ain't sending you no plane ticket. Get your ass down here under your own steam." That's what he warned him before hanging up.

No sooner do we enter the state of Tom Petty and the Buccaneers, but it starts pissing down harder, pouring down with a vengeance. Sweet Jesus.

Al's bronchitis is awful. He's sweaty and feverish. We absolutely have to get him to a hospital soon. Look at the map. How about the one in Ocala? Na, it looks too far inland.

"Hey Al, we could certainly use the expertise of one of your medically trained siblings right about now!" He doesn't laugh at my joke.

I pray that our coughing chorus isn't going to turn into a coffin chorus. What if Bad Voodoo is now following us and not just Al?

What if it never stops?

I can't get comfortable in my seat. The Wench forges ahead like Captain Kirk into the wind-blown spray. I suddenly realize that I don't have my night-time driving glasses. How will I be able to take the wheel when it's my turn? Especially in this monsoon? When I try to track those fuzzy yellow stripes in the high beams, it's all going to be guesswork!

NEW ORLEANS PARTY. Those are just words now, letters fading out of a distant book.

I'm finding it harder and harder to keep myself awake through this wretched downpour. It's Piggly Wiggly snack time! Gotta put some food into these bodies. The Wench runs into the store.

She returns, breathless, eyes wide.

"You're not going to believe this! There's some late-breaking news on the radio! The clerk was just telling me: right outside Miami, some passenger plane just went down!"

She's not joking, either.

No need to remind Al that members of his family at that very moment are supposed to be arriving at Miami airport.

"Did they say if it was taking off or landing?" he blinks slowly. But the clerk had no other details.

We both turn to stare at Al, just waiting for his head to explode, or implode, or for his face to melt off.

The Bad Voodoo, man, it's following us around!

The Wench looks meaningfully at me, and a silent pact is made between us. We've got to get off this cursed ride a.s.a.p! I personally can't handle any more tragedies, calamities, bad luck, karmic paybacks, suspicions, con artistry, or caretaking of the mentally unstable. We've got to exit this goddamn rollercoaster.

Suddenly, my parent's house in Tampa doesn't seem like such a negative option. We should parachute out over there.

Poor Al's lungs. They are just about drowning in mucus. His heart is drowning too under a tidal wave of sorrow that is crashing and breaking apart all around him.

From the back seat, Al croaks a promise: "I'm gonna make sure (ak ak) that there's \$330 bucks for you guys down at the (ak ak) Western Union. (ak ak) That should cover all your gas and expenses from this trip. (cough ak) By Friday. Two days from now. (ak ak) Western Union. You guys have been real good to me. I mean it. (ak ak)"

At the next tank of gas, we pull up behind a blue Ford Taurus. It's a cop car. I wake up just enough to remind the Wench: "See if you can find out more about that airplane crash."

There's a sudden squeal of tires.

"Hurry!" An older woman pulls a fast U-ee into the station while winding her window down. "Hurry, Mick, my daughter's been in a wreck out on route 5!" she shouts in a wobbly voice.

The cop, Mick, goes running for his Taurus.

"It's bad—" she adds woefully.

Like Starsky and Hutch, the two cars speed off to the north, into the rain... into the Bad Voodoo... but there is no further word on the Miami plane crash.

The Wench is pulling a double shift at the wheel, and that is not at all making her happy. No, she did not want to have to play the heroine in this tale, but both men are incapacitated and down for the count.

She makes a beeline for Tampa.

It's 4 in the morning. It's much too late/early to call my folks. Anyway, they believe us to be in Oregon.

As delicately as she can, the Wench asks Al to scribble down his Poppa's address and Miami phone number. You know. For when things have died down. [Oo, bad choice of words.] For when things have mellowed out.

Al, scrawny enough to be an AIDS patient, all fever and pallor and kleenexes, Al then makes a strange request.

“Would you just pass me the Miami map out of my glove compartment (ak ak)? I really only know my dad’s new house from driving there a couple of times, I’m a little shaky on the exact street address... (ak ak).”

The Wench raises an eyebrow.

At least we’ll have that one tiny paper to show for our travails, though. We’ll have that little Rolodex addition to smile about. Big Daddy Warbucks, out there in his mansion on South Beach, he will give us something to smile about soon enough!

Maybe this whole trial was just a necessary sacrifice. One that we were destined to make in order to meet a man of wealth and taste, to get our foot inside his pearly white door.

The night is finally through. It’s 6:30 am as we pull up and park in the driveway of my parent’s suburban home. The stucco, the palm trees and the flowerbeds; the vaulted roofs and the solarized windows with the curtains perpetually drawn... No, not much here has changed!

The mockingbirds are chirping. The neighborhood is waking up as the sun rises. A few businessmen are probably catching an early nine-hole game just past the ponds at the golf club. The fierce rain clouds are finally dissipating.

Frog-eyed, the Wench and I crawl out of the Toyota and approach the front door buzzer.

No more bad voodoo. No more bad voodoo. No more bad voodoo.

“Do you think Al is going to be able to drive himself down to Carrollwood Emergency all by himself?” I wonder.

“Better hope so,” she replies through a forced smile.

We ring the bell twice, and try to summon up memories of the last time we visited this house, from which we were evicted well over a year ago.

The door with its brass knocker cracks open exactly one door-chain length.

It closes.

Then it swings all the way open. My father is standing there in his PJs, a bit bewildered, blinking from the glare of the sunrise behind us.

“Hello,” he greets the two aliens on his porch. “Um. May I help you?”

[Footnote: The address on Al's note later proved to be bogus. So was the telephone number. There would be no \$330 waiting at Western Union. We never heard from Al again.]

THE END * * * * *

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