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Lovelock

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Lovelock

Abstract

Presents a short story about Benjamin Scott, an ex-convict whose life turned a different course after a one-night stand with a retarded woman in Lovelock, Nevada. Promise of a job in San Francisco; Memories of traveling from state to state to get to his destination; Meeting Ana and her sister Lisa; Feelings of guilt for sleeping with Ana; Apologizing to the sisters; Decision to follow Ana to San Diego.

Keywords

Short Story, fiction, Cohen Award

Disciplines

Creative Writing | English Language and Literature | Fiction

Comments

Winner of the 1994 Cohen Award for the best short story and poem published in *Ploughshares* that year.

The billboards into Lovelock, Nevada, promised dinner and drink coupons, a roll of quarters, hot showers, cable television, king-sized beds, breakfast coupons, twenty-four-hour free coffee, air conditioning, and a swimming pool, all for only thirty-nine ninety-nine, and Benjamin West, after three nights dozing in rest stops by the side of the interstate, could not help but be swayed. Lovelock came up on the left-hand side in the middle of the Nevada flats, a one-street town with a skyline of gas stations, hotel-motel-casinos, fast-food restaurants, auto dealers, insurance brokers, a combined elementary-junior high-high school, a chamber of commerce. West took the Chevy down Main Street, keeping his eye out for a name that rang true from one of the highway advertisements. The Lickety Split, The Bell Weather, It's Your Night, On the House, Holiday Inn, Motel 6--their signs lighting up in the dusk like struck pinball targets. West pulled into the lot of Lucky Andy's Roadside Hotel-Motel-Casino. That was the one with the five dollars in quarters and twenty dollars' worth of coupons. He parked between a pickup truck with Wyoming plates and a small Winnebago motorhome out of Florida. He had one hundred and eleven dollars left. He got out of the car, slammed the door locked, and crossed the lot through the stolid heat of dusk to the lobby entrance. Through smoked windows, he could see a small casino, with thirty or so one-arm bandits, four card tables, and a horseshoe-shaped bar. In the refrigerated lobby, a slot machine stood to either side of the registration desk. West peeled off two twenty-dollar bills and laid them before a woman with tall blond hair and platinum-painted fingernails. He was too tired to be subtle. "Will that do?" he said.

"Sure will." She smiled at him. "Do you want an upper rack or a lower rack?"

He looked at her in numb confusion.

"First floor or second floor," she said.

"Second."

She gave him a key, a roll of quarters, and a wad of coupons, her fingertips grazing his knuckles. He glanced at her quickly, but she was already occupied with something else.

He walked stiff-legged back out to the car, walked as if he'd been riding a horse for the last four days instead of a car. His right groin muscle ached, so that he almost walked bowlegged. Over the course of the past twenty-seven hundred miles, he had given up trying to get some circulation going throughout his system by stopping every hundred miles, and just drove until he couldn't take the pain and the cramping and the stiffness anymore. When he slept at the rest stops, he slept folded into the front seat, as if afraid that one of the unsavory types who populated these urine-soaked places late at night, all night, would try to steal the car out from under him. He was a tired motherfucker, and he found himself assimilating the personality he projected of every state he passed through. In

Iowa, he had been bland and unassuming, slumped low in the car as he drove, like an old man. But by North Platte, Nebraska, where the all-night roar of motorcycles cut into his sleep, he'd begun to swagger and curse, and bought a six-pack for a last two-hour dash down the interstate before sleep overcame him. When he dipped into the tip of Colorado, he felt unaccountably swank, wealthy, a Denver Carrington let loose on Fort Collins, and he tucked in his shirt and nodded gravely at gas station attendants, and touched two fingers to his forehead even though there was no hat there. Now Nevada, where whorehouses and casinos stood as wide-open and brazen as McDonald's and Motel 6. West was ready for it.

He sauntered over to the car, recognizing his own ridiculousness and enjoying his ability to recognize it, reveling in the no small accomplishment of traversing the bulk of the country without a driver's license. From the trunk within the trunk of the Malibu, he pulled out clean underwear, fresh jeans, and a white T-shirt, and hobbled up the fire escape-style stairway to his second-floor room.

In the airless mush of humidity and disinfectant, he undressed and got in the shower. Almost four days without a shower, and he was so ripe with the odor that it seemed to coat him like a second skin, the smell of Iowa corn and pigsties, Nebraska wheat and truck exhaust, Wyoming slag, Utah salt. When he'd driven past the Great Salt Lake, he'd pulled over and gotten out and taken a few steps across to the hills shimmering like quartz in the heat. He felt as if he were walking on the moon, the thick bed of shifting, sticking salt suspending rules of gravity and air. He could barely breathe. He got back in the car and gingerly drove through Utah, the road lined with scallops of tires burst open and shredded by heat and traffic.

Now, in the shower, he held his mouth up to the gush of water and rinsed his teeth first, the four-day grit of fast-food hamburgers and funny sandwiches snatched from the glass refrigerators of gas station convenience stores, the thick, sugary film of two dozen caffeine soft drinks, the occasional chocolate bar for energy and digestion, the odd six-pack of beer drunk on the sly over the last bit of midnight road before fatigue closed in and shut him down at a desolate roadstop in Iowa City, Ogallala, Rock Springs. He enjoyed the taste of the water, its chemical pureness of chlorine and fluoride and Nevada minerals, as if it were actually all chemical and not water at all, but some post-nuclear solution that could cleanse you in and out, above and beyond. He drenched his hair with it, then diligently applied soap to his crotch, lathering the testicles, drowning the pubic hair with foam. He ran the soap down each leg, picked up one foot at a time and worked a coat of white between each toe, soaped up his chest and back, then began in earnest on his underarms. It took a long time to take the smell away, and even then he knew that it would come back. Over drinks later, he would begin to smell it working its way from his pores. His smell, which was now the smell of the country and the car and the interstate and a conglomeration of rest stops.

He changed into the fresh set of clothes and descended the metal staircase, each

step ping under his tired weight, to the parking lot. The place was packed with RVs, station wagons, convertibles, minivans, four-door sedans, two-door economy cars. It was America on vacation, caught in the only town for two hundred miles, the oasis of Lovelock. He passed the outside of the casino again, not at all curious. West had been eighteen when Atlantic City had opened up its massive hotels to gambling, and at first he'd been hooked, driving out every weekend during his senior year in high school with slick-talking friends who convinced him that he only had to know he could win, and then he would win. After five hundred dollars over a month and a half of weekends, he recognized the myth of it. Now he fingered the roll of quarters in his pocket and counted up how many drinks it would buy.

The restaurant was on the far side of the lobby, a curtain-draped wood-paneled spectacle done up like a Spanish galleon, with waitresses and waiters swashbuckling along in sashes and eye patches and mock swords strapped to their thighs. According to his coupons, he could have the fifteen-dollar salmon steak for five dollars, or the twelve-dollar T-bone for seven. Obviously the T-bone was fresh and the salmon was not. West stood patiently at the entrance, waiting for one of the pirates to seat him. He shivered in the cold of the arctic air conditioning and wished he'd brought his jeans jacket with him.

One of the pirate waitresses finally beckoned, and he walked his athletic, groin-pulled walk to a little two-person booth with a table the size of two plates. He sat and smiled gratefully at the waitress. The seat backs were so high he could see nobody, and he was spared the embarrassment of others observing his solitary eating. He waved off the offer of the menu.

"I'll have the T-bone and a pitcher of Bud," he said, showing his coupons.

She nodded and left to fill his order.

Above the booth backs and all around him swirled the idle but passionate chatter of families and couples eating and drinking after a day of driving across desert and plain. West patted down his damp hair and leaned back in the booth. He wondered if he was allowed to fall asleep. Automatically his legs pumped for the brake, the gas, and he shot awake, his eyes swimming with images of late-night driving, when cars appeared to miraculously jump guardrails and swerve in his path and animals created by headlights and road reflectors and angles of perception crouched in the middle of the lane. Only five hundred miles farther and he'd reach San Francisco. He rubbed his eyes and waited for his dinner.

When it came, he ate slowly. The steak was charred on the outside, rare at each cut. The baked potato looked like and was as hard as an egg laid by some prehistoric bird. He dabbled with the iceberg lettuce, Pollock-dripping an array of dressings but unable to get it to taste like anything. He drank. The meal would be twelve dollars plus tax and tip. He would have fifty-nine dollars left. The drama

of money. He would need two full tanks of gas--twenty-eight dollars--and a ten-dollar reserve for tolls. That left about fifteen dollars to have a few drinks at the casino bar, to the accompaniment of the clatter and jangle of the one-arm bandits and the clacking of the roulette wheel. He made himself finish the meal.

He was tired and a little woozy, but this was Nevada and he had to drink. He crossed through the lobby to the casino. He sat at the horseshoe-shaped bar and ordered a bourbon on the rocks. An inlaid video poker game stared up at him from the bar. EASY MONEY! EASY MONEY! He moved down a seat to be away from it. At the slot machines, fifty- and sixty-year-old ladies in blue jeans and neckerchiefs loaded coins in, five at a time, accompanied by the whoops of yet older men in cowboy hats and Levi's. Everybody was from someplace else.

He sipped at his drink. Two seventy-five. He had to go slow. His clean clothes made him sleepy. Twenty-seven hundred miles and he was not even there yet. He just wanted to be there. When he'd finally gotten hold of Bob Fields, he'd felt reassured. "You just take as much time as you need," Bob had said. "The job's waiting for you, it isn't going anywhere. Seven days, eight days. I'd say nine maximum. Can you make it in nine?" West had counted his money. "Would it be a problem if I got there a little ahead of schedule?" "No problem at all," Bob said. "We're on a day-to-day contract with the security company. But nine days maximum. Okay?" The guy was utterly reasonable. He had not even tried to hide his breathing on the phone--a low rattle that occasionally rose to a wheezing. West trusted him instantly.

The job paid room, board, and benefits, plus five hundred dollars a month--a pretty good deal, West thought. It would give him a chance to put some distance between himself and prison, and he could figure out what the next step was. He held up his empty glass and waited to catch the bartender's eye. After a pitcher of beer and a shot of bourbon, he was not really so drunk as he thought he should be. Perhaps Lucky Andy's watered their drinks. What had intoxicated West most about the Atlantic City casinos was that, when he was gambling, they gave him drinks free. But that had not helped him in the quixotic struggle to convince himself that he knew he would win. Now he was convinced that he had lost five hundred dollars not because the theory was wrong, but because he had failed, ultimately, in knowing he would win. He looked at the video poker game and reached into his pocket for the quarters.

"Hey, buddy."

The damn thing apparently talked. lie glared at it.

"Hey, buddy. Over here." Someone was knocking on his shoulder as if it were a door. "On your right."

West swirled the bar stool around. His interlocutor, his rescuer, was a man of thirty-odd years and six and a half feet, a white cowboy hat cocked on his head

like a second grin, a strong jaw, five o'clock face. An open-lipped toothy smile, waiting for the go-ahead to continue talking. West was delighted to discover that he was drunk, after all, and at the back of his mind he was frightened by it, too, he could feel it coming on like a train through a tunnel, and he was trapped by it. There would be nothing he could do but get up after it had run him over. He wondered if he would have to throw up.

"What," he said uneasily.

The smile drew shut in a line of gratitude, at having been recognized by the chair. The chair nodded for him to go on.

"I've got my hands full, buddy, if you know what I mean," the smile said. "Two ladies." The hat wagged in a direction West could not follow. "I was wondering if you might help me out." He clapped West familia fly on the shoulder. "How about it?"

West looked at him, trying to discern the motivation for such a gift. It was some kind of scam, belied by the easy smile, the white teeth, the open face.

"What the hell," West said. He slouched off the bar stool. "Where are they?"

The smile steered him around the curve of the bar. "Name's Jack," he said.

"Scott," West lied. It was his favorite of fake names.

"Well, Scott, by the end of the night you'll be thanking me. I just know it."

They pulled up at the far end of the bar, underneath a cold shaft of air conditioning, where two women in their twenties sat stirring their drinks. One of the women looked up. She had long dirty-blond hair waved around a thin face. A smirk spread, which she did not attempt to hide. West had to admit that she was beautiful. "You found somebody," she said.

"This is Scott," Jack said.

"I'm Lisa." The woman frowned at West and gave a sideways nod of her head.

"This is my sister, Ana. Don't fuck with her."

Ana looked up at West frankly, with uncautious eyes. Her short brown hair was parted incidentally in the middle, and faint freckles rose with a blush in her face. "Be nice," she said to Lisa. She took West's hand and shook it. Her wrist seemed as thin as his thumb. "I'm pleased to meet you," she said.

"He's a jerk," Lisa said. She jabbed West in the shoulder with her index finger.

"I'll repeat myself. Don't fuck with her."

"I'm out of here," West said. He turned to go. Somebody caught his arm and he

assumed it was Jack, but when he looked down, it was Ana.

Jack laughed. "Okay, babe. I did my end." He offered the crook of his elbow to Lisa, and she took it and rose off the stool. She was wearing a tank top and very tight jeans, and she undulated in such a way that West instinctively checked to see if his mouth was open.

"You two be good." She smiled fakely at both of them, while Jack began to lead her away. "Honestly," she said. "I don't care what you do."

West watched them go, two tapered backs. Ana still held on to him, and he could not bring himself to move. He shut his eyes and then opened them, expecting to find himself staring down at the video poker game. She let go and patted the empty seat beside her.

"Join me," she said.

Obediently he sat on the stool.

She touched his hair lightly. "I like your hair," she said. "It's clean." He tensed, liking her touch, wanting her to go further. She selected a lock and stretched it unpainfully between two fingers. "Don't you worry about Lisa. She's my younger sister but I frustrate her terribly." She said it in an even way, without irony.

"The way she was"--West felt for each word--"I thought she was older."

"It's because I'm a little slow," Ana said. She let go of the hair and turned his head to face her. "Retarded. Would you mind kissing a retarded girl?"

"No," West said. It was a weird joke, but he'd play along. "I wouldn't."

She pulled his head to her and kissed him, long and tight-lipped, as if she had learned by watching television, her face moving instead of her mouth. It was still a nice kiss. He drew back. "Did you like it?" she said. Her finger traced his face.

"Sure." West glanced around the casino to see if anyone had noticed. They hadn't. He rubbed the back of his neck. He liked her bangs and how small her nose was. He felt as if the back of his head had been shot off and all the air was rushing in. He reached for the back of his head. It was still there. He wondered if this were the train of his drunk finally coming, to knock him out.

"Can I buy you a drink?" she said. "I have ten dollars." She took out a purse from a little red pocketbook and showed him the money. She handed him a personal identification card that said TENNESSEE in a hologram across her face. She pointed at the birthdate. "I'm twenty-five," she said. "See." Effortlessly she flagged down the bartender. "What are you drinking?"

West shook his head and swallowed to see how close the drink was to

overpowering him. It was not close enough. "Bourbon," he said hoarsely.

"Bourbon," she said. The bartender nodded and went off to make the drink. "Bourbon," she said again, drawing out the r, tasting the n on the roof of her mouth. He could see her that clearly. "What's it like?"

He'd never thought much about it. "It's like," he began. He swallowed. Soon the alcohol would overwhelm him, and he'd be saved. "It's like water mixed with the skin of red apples. Like the very sweet bitterness of apple skin."

"It doesn't sound very good," she said.

"It isn't," he agreed. But it was sure as hell going to stop him, which was lucky.

The bartender returned with the drink. It was straight up, no ice. West nodded at Ana and forced a sip. He hated warm bourbon. He made himself take a gulp. Bile rose halfway up his throat and he was pleased. "Thank you," he said.

"Do you have a room here?" Ana said. She touched his hair again and he froze. "Jack has a room. Lisa and I share a room. I think I'd like to see your room." Her hand fell lightly to the back of his neck, and she squeezed it tenderly between her thumb and index finger. He shivered. He looked at her. The air conditioning fluttered her bangs. She took in his look with what appeared to be mild interest. "Are you ready?"

She was behind the curve but she was not that far behind. But she was far enough behind as to be behind the curve. She was capable of complex thought the way a twelve-year-old was capable of complex thought--serendipitously. It was a long word and he took a dip with it into the bourbon. He wished he did not have a room. He wished he were back at his old seat at the other end of the horseshoe. He wished--almost--that he were back in prison.

"How, exactly," he said. "How exactly did we get into this?" He leaned his head into his hands, her fingers falling down his back, and shut his eyes, saw explosions of light, and opened them again.

"I think you're nice," she said.

"Oh, I'm nice." He sighed. "I'm very nice." He drained his drink. He could feel his train of drunkenness coming through and it was not going to knock him down, it was going to take him with it. He reared off the stool. "Let's go."

She stood, reached for his hand, and caught it. They walked out of the casino, hand in hand, she holding on tight enough so that he knew not to break loose, but loose enough to seem as if she understood he would not think of leaving her. The bright light of the lobby hit him suddenly, and he reeled at it. She guided them to the door and opened it for them, still holding on to his hand.

They were outside, in the night. He hoped the air would help, but it was flat, dry desert air, ineffectual. She led him toward the parking lot, to where the cars sat caged in their heat and grease.

"Where's your car?" she said.

"Don't know." He could see it quite easily, the black vinyl hood, the wide brown body. The Pennsylvania license plate peeking out between the Winnebago and the pickup.

"Ours is over there."

He looked at her arm as she pointed, the way it extended out of her short-sleeved dress in a stunning, naked pureness, the subtle looseness of flesh around the upper arm, the taut forearm with a hint of muscle, the impossible narrow wrist, the fingers long and slender. He wanted to eat them. Their car was a four-door, dull silver Toyota that looked almost blue in the sparsely lighted parking lot.

"We're going to visit our aunt and uncle in San Diego," she said. "Where are you going?"

"Los Angeles," West said.

"Maybe I could see you on our way back. That would be in two weeks." She pressed his hand.

"Sure." He touched her arm, followed it up toward the shoulder, just to see if he could. He certainly could. His fingertips felt for the sleeve opening and he was in and feeling the very light titillating growth of hair at her underarm. And then past and lightly pressing the swell of her breast, touching it at the very base of the bra before the nylon consumed it, measuring its potential size. Already he was hard. He wanted to bring around her hand that so persistently was locked in his and make her touch it. He was aghast to discover that that was just what he was doing.

"Not in the parking lot," she said.

They led each other through the rows of cars and vans and pickups and campers to the metal staircase.

"The second rack," she said.

Up the stairs, the loud pinging like coins dropping down a well, and along the thinly carpeted porch of a hallway to his room. He fought with the key for a moment, wanting it to take long enough to allow her to escape. Instead, she moved out of his light, to give him a better chance to open the door. She strode in without invitation, and he followed, turning on the light and at first hesitating but then shutting the door firmly and flicking on the air conditioning.

"It's just like ours," she said. "I knew it would be."

He started for the television, to get some more noise in the room, but she intercepted him. She caught him and hugged him tightly, her cheek against his, as if they were saying goodbye. He looked forlornly beyond her to the television, which he now realized he had considered his last hope. Against his chest, her breasts seemed to be throbbing, demanding his attention.

The buttons down the back of her dress came easily to him, and he unhooked each of the four discs while her hands slipped down to his buttocks and pressed and then got a grip and squeezed, each hand to its own buttock. Her dress fell from her shoulders to her forearms. In the honeycomb of light--for the overhead lamp had a straw basket shade that released thin sheaves of illumination--he saw the creamy part of her neck, the soft cups of her bra. Without waiting for her to step from her dress, he unhooked the bra. She was undressed in such a way that it looked as if perhaps she were trying to dress. He hesitated, and she came out of her pumps and her dress and her bra all at once.

He fell onto the bed with her and bucked against her, squirming to kick out of his sneakers and jeans and trying to get her panties down her legs. She sighed. He could not tell whether it was a sigh of resignation or enjoyment, and again he stopped. It struck him, taking her in--the incautious eyes, the incidental part in her bangs, the minute nose dotted minutely with freckles, the calm breasts with the inerect nipples--it struck him that it was a sigh of indifference. The bourbon rose in his throat and he shut it down, willed it back to a place he had yet to discover. He was atop her.

"What's that?" she said.

She was fingering a pimple on his right buttock.

"It's a pimple," he said. "I've got a pimple there." He forced his tongue inside her mouth.

"Oh," she said around it. "A pimple." She giggled, it was another word whose sound she seemed to like.

He slid his hand along the inside of her thigh, and at the same time moved her under him so soon her free hand would be where he wanted it to be. He felt the hair between her legs and then probed inside. She was a little wet, not quite wet enough. He was terribly hard. She grazed him, then gripped him. He massaged her wetness.

"I have to ask you something," she said. She was slightly out of breath, holding onto him. "Should you be doing this?"

"Yes." From his perspective, it was just too late, the train had come through and

he was on it and he just had to ride it. He just had to follow this through. He pulled against her grip, trying to get loose.

"It's a strange hotel," she said, her face turned to the side so that she appeared to be examining the loud air conditioner and the green curtains that quivered against it.

"You're not kidding." He was finally where he wanted to be. He started.

"You sure you should be doing this?" she asked again.

"Yes." Now retreat was impossible. He had no choice.

"How does it feel?"

He didn't answer her, he kept at it. She clung to him.

"Do you like it?" she asked.

"Yes." He did.

She squirmed. "I think we should stop."

"Soon."

"Are we going to stop?"

"Yes."

She touched his face. "When are we going to stop?"

"Soon." If she would just be quiet, he was almost ready.

"I don't like it."

"I know" He stopped. Through the sheaves of light he could see her eyes, wide open and indifferent. She had certainly had experience in masturbation, but it had not prepared her to understand. He was sure she would be all right. He pulled out.

"Los Angeles," she said.

He came against the bedspread, unable and unwilling to rein it in. It seemed to him that he came for a long time, but he could not be sure. He tried to hide it from her. She was already pulling on her panties.

"Can I use your bathroom?"

He clutched a swath of bedspread around him, began to dry himself off while he still came. "Of course," he managed.

She moved to the bathroom, picking up pieces of clothing as she went. She shut

the door behind her, then laughed, and opened it. He turned his back to the sound of her, felt the light of the bathroom on his shoulders. She hummed and made water at the same time, like a song with instrumentals. He finished drying himself off and began to get into his clothes. She got off the toilet and flushed and washed her hands in the sink. She was fully dressed and he was trying to shimmy into his jeans.

"We leave at seven tomorrow for our aunt and uncle's," she said, touching his back with her clean hand. "Will you come see us off?"

"Sure." He finally had his jeans on. Where was his shirt? Frantically he scanned the room.

"I have to go."

He nodded his agreement. He spied the shirt under the corner of the bed and bent to pick it up. Behind him, she started for the door.

"Won't you kiss me good night?" she said.

Relieved, he stood. They kissed each other on the cheek. She opened the door and was through and shut it quickly behind her. He listened. She did not walk immediately away. She stood at the door and called in, softly, "Don't forget tomorrow morning. Seven a.m." He nodded at the door, even though he couldn't see her, even though he had no intention of making the engagement. Finally, he heard her leave.

He went to the sink in the bathroom and splashed water on his face. In the yellow light, his hands looked green. He felt a little green. He located the toilet, lifted the seat, got down on his knees, and stuck his finger down his throat to help things along. He gagged around his finger. At last, it came, so much liquid, as if he'd not eaten anything in a long time. He let it come, he tried to encourage it to come, he tried to be patient. Sweat broke out on his back. His throat was raw. He stood, went back to the sink, and drank tap water from the cup of his palm. He put his mouth to the tap, rinsed. He considered taking another shower, but concluded he could not spare the time.

He took a last look around the room, gathered up his dirty clothes, and shut off all the lights. He stood at the door. It was past midnight. He opened the door and slipped through and shut it softly. Lightly he made his way down the metal stairs to the parking lot, the steps almost silent, making only the faintest jangle.

He navigated the rows of vehicles to his car. He unlocked the door, got in, shut the door, and started the engine. He waited a few seconds to make sure it was ready, then backed out of the space and crept to the exit. Only after he had turned right out of the lot and was on Main Street did he switch on his headlights. The road was lined with twenty-four-hour convenience stores, and he was terribly

thirsty. Straight ahead and beyond the town, in the blackness of the flats, was the interstate, occasional lights of solitary traffic scudding across the overpass. He did not think he could afford to stop. In his mouth was the taste of tap water and vomit. The still-sunbaked car smelled of it and of his new sweat and of the old sweat that he'd been unable to air out. Once he got on the interstate, he would allow himself to roll down the windows. He would stick his head out the window as he drove, taking in the air like a dog. He laughed at the comparison--it was appropriate.

Now he was up on the interstate, over Lovelock and past it. He could not quite risk rolling down the windows yet. He was terribly paranoid. He deserved paranoia. Almost suffocating with the smell of himself, he drove through the flats.

At three a.m., West pulled into a gas station on the outskirts of Reno, Nevada, with nothing more on his mind than filling up the tank, picking up a couple cans of soda, and getting the hell out of Nevada. By his calculations, it was quite possible to arrive and be already settled in San Francisco before the Tennessee sisters even woke in Lovelock.

West climbed from the car and stretched. His legs and arms felt numb and shaky from lack of sleep and a hangover of indeterminate magnitude. The air smelled of gasoline and money, the dry, papery, handworn, printed odor of stacks of bills lying on a counter somewhere up the boulevard, where in the distance the city glowed like a red hole sunk in the middle of the desert.

West limped his way over to the glassed-in window where an attendant sat hunkered down under a green baseball cap and a rack of cigarettes that appeared to extend from his head all the way up into the ceiling.

"You can't come in" he said via a microphone to a speaker that came out above West's left ear.

"I know it." West took out a twenty and laid it in the projected pocket pushing out from the window. "Can you give me a tank of unleaded and a couple of Cokes?"

The attendant slid the pocket back inside the window, took out the bill, held it up to the light, and sighed. "I'll push in your gas order now, but fetching the drinks will take a few." He pointed behind him at the brightly colored mini-mart that lined the walls--green and orange and red bags of assorted potato chips, pretzels, cookies; a row of glass refrigerators stocked with beer, soda, and fruit drinks; two stunted aisles piled with toilet paper, detergent, dog food. The attendant punched in the unlimited dollar amount for West's pump, and stood up. He nodded down at his hands. They were clutching a walker. He began to maneuver his way out from the cashier's post like a car doing a three-point turn.

"No hurry," West said. He wiped his mouth with his hand and came away with crushed flecks of dead skin. His voice sounded like a rasp. He went back to the

car and started pumping.

Across the boulevard was a huddled, shady outline of a trailer park. His hand felt hot and oily around the handle of the pump, and it kept slipping. He had to concentrate to keep the mechanism pressed in, and even then it slipped. He tried to relax. A drop of sweat worked its way from his underarm down the side of his chest. With his free hand, he patted his T-shirt to soak up the perspiration. As soon as he had finished, he felt another drop emerge. The boulevard seemed slick beneath the watery street-light. He touched his hand to his forehead and it came back damp. At seventeen-fifty, the gas pump clicked off.

He screwed on the cap to the tank, replaced the nozzle, and was squeezing back into the car when he realized he had forgotten his change and the Cokes. He righted himself and crossed back to the cashier's window.

"I thought I had me some free Cokes." The cashier grinned from under his cap. He couldn't have been older than thirty. "Or a big tip. Whatever." He stuck the Cokes and West's change into a glass box to West's left, and shut the little door. "Now you can open it."

West reached in and got his sodas and money. He considered leaving the eighty cents as a tip, but decided that would be both weak and self-serving. He clenched the two Cokes in the fist of one hand and returned to the car.

He sat in the Chevy, staring out the smeared windshield. In the hotel room at Lucky Andy's, thin sheaves of light had illuminated aspects of Ana's body, her small breasts, the creamy part of her neck. He'd tasted her nipples, a salty sweetness. He started the car and drove out from the pump. At the end of the gas station, he looked right, studying the boulevard into Reno. The cars on the road appeared to be from a different era, wide bodies with tail fins and brake lights that slanted like eyebrows. He turned left. Within half a block, the interstate arrived, a minor conflagration of on-ramps and overpasses. He stretched against the seat, only to discover that a pool of almost gelatinous sweat had formed at the small of his back. He wiped his mouth, and then cracked open one of the Cokes. Without further consideration, he guided the Chevy up the on-ramp heading east, heading back toward Lovelock.

On his way across the desert, he searched the landscape for signs that he had not been this way before, that he'd only imagined it. The moon lit the bed of rock and sand into shades of blue, and the night sky met the land with walls of depthless black. He couldn't tell anymore what had happened, what she'd said, what he'd said. What they'd done. He took a long swallow of Coke and waited. He could feel it coming. He pulled over onto the shoulder of the road and quickly got out of the car. He walked around the back of it, and descended a soft slope into the flats. The ground was hard under his feet. The crumbles of land that had broken loose felt like marbles against the thin soles of his sneakers. Rocks jutted out across the

desert, their points glinting like wrecks in a sea. He could still feel it coming. It bent him at the waist, and the seat of his jeans was suddenly damp with his sweat. He vomited.

Was it what he had done, or what he had drunk? His eyes filled with tears from the effort and pain of puking. Around him, he could feel the dry earth soaking him up. He was careful not to fall. When he had finished, he tiptoed out of the semicircle of it, walked a good distance away, and peed.

Afterward, he climbed the soft slope to the road and walked out onto the middle of the pavement. He could still feel the heat of the sun rising from it. Above and around him, the night was turning, fading, draining into day. Blue crept into the sky. He would still reach San Francisco by the end of this one, provided the sister didn't have him arrested. She did not seem the type. She would dismiss him instead. He could live with that. He did not mind being dismissed. In the distance, he heard something coming, and he turned and saw, about a mile back down the interstate, a truck making its way toward him, the lights atop its cab standing out like a hairline. The truck honked two times, as if it could see him. He crossed back to the side of the road and got into his Chevy. What was left of the first Coke had spilled over onto the floormat, and the car smelled of sugar and caffeine. In a day, he would sell it. He cracked the second can of Coke and took a sip. He swished it around in his mouth like mouthwash, and spit it out the open window. He tried another sip. It tasted better. Up ahead, the truck was still coming, lumbering across the flats toward him. He started the Chevy. He would miss it, when he sold it, but he'd be relieved as well. It was a damned good car.

It moved weightily over the road, through the flats, as if it knew it had been this way before and resented having to repeat it. He laughed and gulped at the Coke. The truck came up from the other direction and shot past him in a clatter of wind and metal and tire flaps. He finished his Coke and tried to lick the film of it from his teeth. Clouds approached in the gradual blueing of dawn. He would arrive in Lovelock on time. A paper bag caromed across the flats. From a great distance, he spied another oncoming truck. It was just him and the truck and the paper bag. He wondered what he would say to her, if her sister knew, what either of them would say to him. He wondered why he was doing this to himself. To leave nothing undone, nothing to chance. To save himself from his conscience. To extend a trip that was bound to end in the hollow disappointment of a crummy job. To stall the onset of the rest of his life. But California, he was going to California! That was someplace, by God. He tried the radio. Nothing, not even static. Sparks ought to have had a radio station, but he was too far past it, closing in on Lovelock. The sky around him filled with the flat whiteness of heat and haze. He had somehow missed the actual sunrise, and now the sun had slipped out of view. It was already above the car somewhere. He could feel it through the vinyl roof, but it wasn't even six yet. Yes, it was. It was exactly six. Lovelock in thirty miles. He ought to slow down. He didn't want to get there early, just in case what awaited him

proved unpleasant or unfair. He ought to be stretching this out, the passing rockscape, the dry, cracked barrenness, the hot wind coming into the car. This feat of motion. He turned the steering wheel slightly, to see if the car would obey it. He drifted into the right lane, then back to the left and over toward the double yellow line. He could still do whatever he wanted. It was almost mid-June, the steady, relentless, ripening, approaching summer, the sweat of the car mixing with the sweat of the road. Soon he would be in San Francisco, with a job, an apartment, resigning himself to routine, a city, the deadening haul of daily work. He jiggled the steering wheel again, it was still with him, it made the car respond. He adjusted his rearview mirror to see if anyone was coming. There was no one. When he turned his attention back to the road in front of him, the second truck was upon him. He jerked awake, jerking the car with him to the right, then correcting himself. The truck was already fifty feet past, curving toward Sparks. It had not even been close.

He had not slept since the rest stop in Rock Springs, twenty-four hours ago. It was affecting his driving. He shouldered up over the wheel, willing himself to concentrate. The first billboard approached, a blaze of red and orange rising out of the white rock of the flats. He squinted at it. It was not Lucky Andy's. Lucky Andy's colors, he recalled, were the red and black of the pirate sashes and eye patches and pantaloons, with some gold thrown in for the treasure hunters. He thought of the horseshoe-shaped bar and his stomach seemed to stand up and spin against his skin. His chest still felt tender from the rawness of the vomiting.

Within ten miles of Lovelock, the car appeared to catch a tail wind that made it go faster than he thought it should. He could feel the wide trunk buffeting in the swirl of air. His hands on the steering wheel were greasy with sweat. He braked just to see if he could. The car slowed, but not as much as he had hoped. The billboards were coming fast and furious, as if they'd been held in check for the last hundred miles and were suddenly let free. They gave the flats color and a skyline. Just as he thought that perhaps Lovelock had passed him by, the road opened to his right and the car skated down the off-ramp and he was calmly turning onto Main Street and facing down its procession of gas stations, hotels, motels, casinos, and convenience stores. It was six-thirty. He pulled into the parking lot of a Denny's and turned off the car and got out and stretched his legs and looked up at the sky and kicked at the loose gravel in the lot, to see if he had changed his mind about this. He went into Denny's and bought an iced tea and drank it standing up in the men's room. He urinated, splashed water on his face, and ran his fingers through his hair like a comb.

Outside, at the car, he hesitated about whether to drive the few blocks to Lucky Andy's or walk. He got in and started the car, pulled from the lot, and drove the three and a half blocks. He parked at the curb, got out, and crossed the street to Lucky Andy's. It was six-fifty. The parking lot of Lucky Andy's was still packed with America on Vacation. He found the four-door Toyota with the Tennessee

plates and waited next to it, as if expecting a ride.

Lisa came out first, from a door near the ice machine, shouldering a blue-striped beach bag and lugging a tan suitcase. He resisted the impulse to help her. Her face was flushed by the time she reached the car.

"What do you want?" she said, pushing past him to the trunk of the car and dumping the two pieces of luggage on the asphalt.

"I came to see Ana off," West said.

"Well, how about that." She opened the trunk and began to lever the heavy suitcase in, using her knee and shoulder. "Are you going to help me, or what?"

West pitched in with the suitcase, and it thunked onto the floor of the trunk. The car jounced on its shocks. She threw the shoulder bag in, and looked up at him.

"You look awfully guilty," she said. Her tan line showed at the white straps of her tank top. She was wearing shorts, and her legs stretched out of them like swords. He shrugged. "I don't want to hear about it," she said.

"I slept with her," West said. "Last night. In my room."

"In your room" she said, mouthing the words as if they were part of a foreign language. Evidently, Ana hadn't told her. The heat hurtled at his forehead. He'd been up too long. The parking lot glinted with mica chips and car hoods and radio antennas.

"Scott!" Ana yelled. "Scott." In shorts and a pink button-down shirt, she came loping across the sparkling space toward him. She hugged him, her bare legs against his jeans. Even in daylight, she was still nice, her cream skin, the uncautious eyes. "You came."

"I bet he did," Lisa said. She slammed the trunk shut, "What the hell do you want with us?" She stood up straight. She was still not tall enough. "Too bad Jack isn't here."

"Are you all right?" West said to Ana.

"I'm fine." She nodded vigorously. "I know I wanted you to, even if I didn't like it. It's easier by myself. I guess it's the one thing I can do best by myself. Not like I can't do things by myself. I shop for Lisa, you know. I can count change." She held out her hand to him. "Give me some change and I'll show you. I'll count it."

"Jesus," Lisa said.

West stood wavering beside her. He felt very odd.

"You were inside me," Ana said. "I remember that. I remember how it felt. It felt

like nothing new. It felt like I could have had my arm inside me. Well, not that big. It didn't do what I needed it to do. Are you going to give me some change so I can count it?"

"I have to sit down," West said. He sat in the parking lot. The heat sealed his mouth. It was awfully hot. He could feel a sunburn coming on, spreading along the back of his neck. Maybe a stroke. He wouldn't mind a stroke. He could feel the dampness of his jeans wedding itself to the stickiness of the lot. He was going to be stuck there. He looked up at the faces of the sisters, blurred by their height and the haze. They were going to need some sort of forklift to get him up. He looked up at them for a long time, his mouth half-open. Their heads bent to listen. The sun was a shoulder above them. It had popped out of the white sky.

"Get up." He could hear Lisa's voice. She pulled at his elbow. "Come on, up with you."

Gradually, he stood up. The parking lot felt like the deck of a great boat, tilting toward the hotel, the street, the hotel again. He righted himself. Now Ana was holding onto his arm. Morning traffic began to flow past on the street.

"Do you know what you've done," Lisa said. It wasn't a question. West nodded anyway, through the thick heat, his neck a lever for the unwieldy emptiness in his head.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Sorry doesn't do a whole hell of a lot for her," Lisa said. The sun on her face hid her expression. He listened to her, waiting for what she decided. "You think just by showing up you can somehow save yourself from your conscience." She shook her head, the sun holding her eyes. "A jerk like you." She chewed on her lip. "What if," she said, "what if I just left the two of you together like this in the parking lot, stuck here like two posts in cement. What if I did that? What would you do then, Scott?"

"Are we going to call the police?" Ana said.

Lisa turned back to the car, stepping away from the sun, and hitched up her shorts. West saw her clearly, the thinness the suppleness. "I never wanted to know," she said. "Let's just get out of here." She walked around and unlocked the driver's door and got in and shut it. She started the car.

Ana still held on to West, silently, without expression.

"Ana," he said. "I'm sorry for what I did."

"I wanted you to." She kissed him as the car exhaust rose around them. "And you're coming to see me off. Don't mind what Lisa says."

"Ana," Lisa called from the car. She wouldn't look at them. "Goddamn it."

"Okay." Ana kissed him again, goodbye. Suddenly, but without any, kind of accompaniment, she was crying. He could feel her tears on his face. "It's been a wonderful day."

Lisa leaned over and opened the door for her. Ana backed away from West and stepped into the car. Her foot caught and she fell against the seat, her legs sticking out. She curled them up to her chest, those bare legs, and her sister reached around her and pulled the door shut. She stared at West through the window, Lisa did, as if she had something to say to him but she couldn't remember what it was. It could have been I'm sorry for you, it could have been I hate you, it could have been I knew. Instead, she just shook her head and turned back to face the windshield.

West watched them leave, the car rolling out to the street and then turning right and pulling through Lovelock, the bland faces of the always-open convenience stores, to the interstate, where they climbed through the heat onto the road west, the car a silver blur as it raced away from the town. It was seven-thirty. He would have to drive for four hours through the heat, until he reached the Sierra and the temporary relief of the mountains before the sun-boiled stretch of the California central valley. He crossed the street and got into his car, the vinyl hot through his jeans, sweat seared to him. He watched his foot work the gas, felt his hand pop the emergency brake. The car hummed when he turned the key. He looked out the windshield, particles of air shimmering in waves off the pavement, rippling the storefronts of Main Street, the flats beyond it a colorless smear. He pulled a U-turn and headed out toward the interstate. He got on it gingerly, and kept the car to a moderate speed. He would have to be careful for a long time, so as not to overtake the Toyota from Tennessee.