

## Off-roading – a short story by David Bradley

Never has a hot shower been so refreshing. And, when I say hot, I mean truckstop-scour-off-the-elbow-grease hot. Was it five dollars each? I don't remember. It was 96 degrees outside and that's in Fahrenheit, the water inside was closer to 96 degrees on the Centigrade scale. The price, the temperature. None of mattered. It was, if not a baptism of fire, then a scalding rebirth. It was money well spent.

It surely felt like a rebirth, following a blue highway west that got ever paler as the miles unfurled beneath the seemingly unending froth of the Milky Way, a wrong turn-off, led to another, and before we knew it, it was pitch black and the Pontiac was careering the wrong way past a hairpin and into an emboldered field. It was an hour before we stopped shaking and got the car back on to the road. It was another hour before we got to the grease-dissolving truckstop and the chance to rinse away soured adrenalin and existential angst.

We'd picked up the car, not from Lemon Rentals, thankfully, and not from Freddie Hachiro who would only let us take it around the tri-state area and certainly not from Baltimore to 'Frisco via The Grand Canyon, and back again. It was a Trans Am, rather than a Firebird, but hey we were on a student-tight budget with only free coffee refills and Salteens to live on. And, although "gas" was cheap, incredibly just about 50 cents a gallon at the time, there were no free refills for an 8000-mile grand tour of a couple of dozen of the fifty states.

Once we crossed the border into Tennessee, we had used up all our cassette tapes and discovered to our chagrin that the car radio had no FM, only AM, and all stations had only two kinds of music for our entertainment – country AND western. The deeper you get into The Bible Belt the more happy-clappy that C&W became. One day at a time, sweet Jesus, one day at a time.

The Canyon was astonishing, if you could hover at a point directly above The Colorado River but level with its distant upper edges and look down at the raging torrent below, you would be looking down a mile and a half. Pebbles hewn from the rock by that torrent are a billion and a half years old. Those are some amazing numbers befitting an amazing sight. At that time of year, there were few tourists around, it was well after Labor Day, of course, and stepping out on to the first perimeter viewpoint to look across and down made us both draw breath sharply and laugh out loud.

We dismounted in Death Valley, it was fatally hot. There was so little moisture in the air, your cooling sweat evaporated before it even got a chance to form beads on your skin, you could become desiccated very quickly. We crawled in the dust, pretending to be stranded air-crash victims simply waiting for the circling buzzards to descend against the thermals and pluck our eyes. We snapped snaps with a pocket film camera, using so many of the precious 36 frames. We even strummed a few chords on the battered guitar that had been riding shotgun since our time in Gore. It was a classic with one fewer than the standard six strings and was wantonly disassembled by us red rock stars in the desert. We care a lot.

Onwards we rolled, blue highway after blue highway, imagining ourselves some kind of pioneers chasing the gold and fearing that The Big One would stir and shake us when we found San Andreas.

It was nobody's fault. The road ahead was no road ahead. There were no signs, only a deviation. The boulders were emboldened, the Pontiac not so much. Blood is thicker than water, they say, they don't tell you just how hot it can run, seeping into the dirt carrying with it the last of our elbow grease. Yesterday's gone...tomorrow was never mine. Sweet Jesus.