

Another Roadside Attraction

Halfway down to nowhere or somewhere in between, Rodney discovered an ancient ground, or at least what he believed to be ancient. Map-wise, he was driving through a remote corner of the Southwest USA, direction unknown. Wherever he was headed it was *away*. He had already passed the point-of-no-return the moment he stepped into his 72' Cutlass back in LA, the moment he made the decision to never look back, only yesterday, an eternity ago.

Rodney didn't know what road he was on, but he liked it. No traffic lights. Not another car in sight. No convenient stores or stations, no signs seducing or pointing to the nearest destination. Except for the long hypnotic line of the road and the telephone poles hugging it, there was no sign of life. No roadside distractions. Ironical, Rodney thought, how alive he could feel in a place like this, how easy it was to breathe in so much space. Here, in the middle of somewhere and nowhere. Where the road and the landscape open wide and rub against a road-hazard sky. Sky that runs forever, limitless and thin. Sky that light dances through and eagles soar through. Sky that leaves you longing to be free of earth's firm grip.



No ordinary earth. Here the land is jagged, scarred, and bleeds all over itself in deep shades of crimson. Deep scars, and they're everywhere— river-rock scars, water-wind scars and once-upon-a-sea scars. Some pending, some mending, others never ending. Rodney liked it here, wherever *here* was. He felt at home lost in this rugged land. It felt permanent, impenetrable. A place that humans and gods and even time had forgotten about. An unforgiving place that warns, "Stay out! You're not invited." A fanged and prickly place where most of the residents either pinch, claw, bite, sting or all of the above.



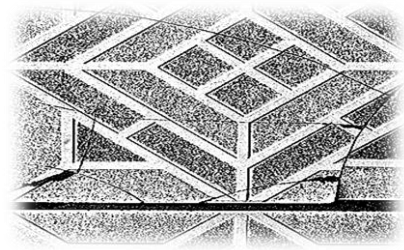
A place that smothers and barely breathes one day, and the next cracks open the sky, drenches the land and turns everything inside out. A place where the night is tar-black and provides the perfect stage for stars telling stories of worlds yet to know. A place better experienced and not described. A place that grabs you by the throat then rips out your soul.

A place full of scars. Rodney was surprised no one had bandaged them up yet with wads of sterile landscape and *Designer Homes*, then patched up the messy edges with suburban-grade grass

whose family tree never knew land half this dry. A nice surprise, Rodney grinned. He never knew a place remotely like this. Never imagined he would call it home.



The coming home to an empty house, the turned-down photo, the cleaned-out drawers, the last ‘Dear Rodney, Love Candace’ letter— they were all quite a surprise. But the fingerless metallic shine left at the bottom of an envelope...was just too much. Too heavy was the weight of a broken promise of *“till death do us part.”* Now, even the weight of his body was too much. All Rodney could do was drop and fall to his knees against the hard kitchen tile— tile they laid down together sixteen years ago when they first moved in, when the house and everything else was new, just shortly after they swore *“I do”*. Halfway to the floor, Rodney clutched the ring in his own ring-fingered hand. The other hand held the letter as if it were something foreign, not of this world. His eyes followed his knees down to the tile. This close up, he saw imperfections he never noticed before. Many of the tiles didn’t fit well, some were worn down. Others had fine, deep cracks running through them. They looked stable enough, but he was sure they wouldn’t last on their own. Under pressure, they’d crumble and fall apart.



Tile. Not-so-perfect tile. Tile they shared meals on, shared all their hopes and dreams on. Tile they yelled and laughed and cried on. Tile they made love on till they were breathless and couldn’t move.

Rodney didn’t move. Didn’t need to, didn’t want to. He laid on the tile for what may have been hours, maybe months. Laid there letting the hardness ache his bones, letting the cold seep through his skin, down into his heart. Laid there heavy until something could lighten him, or at least until he found a good reason to get up.



Light was fading. The sun slipped over horizon’s sharp edge as sky played with land, mimicking its colors and mood. Rodney was tired. Dirt tired. He’d been driving for ten straight hours and his eyes were sinking fast. He focused harder on the road, but that only made his eyes heavier. Not helping the situation, darkness came knocking on a long day’s door. Light and shadow played peek-a-boo from behind reddened hills. The hypnotic, straight line that Rodney stuck to finally began to curve. The road narrowed, then snaked along several catch-a-glimpse canyons that were carved out eons ago by ancient rivers whose human-endowed names only mock their long history. Rivers, like the Colorado and the Rio Grande, flowing long before language, and probably long after.



Rodney watches a ray of light shoot out from a cloud then plunge into a dark gorge. The rock grabs most of the light except for a narrow beam that finds its way down to the river below — a thin, lead-colored serpent dancing out of sight. The ray catches her, and reflects off her slippery back. Rodney squints as the mirrored light catches his eyes in short bursts, others even longer. He imagines the slippery beast may be signaling for help. *Maybe she's in trouble, or just lost her way.*



Candace didn't mind accompanying Rodney to Gould Hall since she was headed that way. She also knew what it felt like to be lost on a huge college campus, first-day-of-college lost. Rodney was looking for a friendly face when Candace smiled his way. Rodney fell fast, and Candace followed suit. Soon, one chance meeting led to another, slightly contrived one, and the dance ensued. Their friendship grew into fondness, fondness into bliss, until the fire swelled then receded to a soft and solid glow. *He and she became they, and when they spoke, they spoke of we.*

It was her eyes that grabbed him
and wouldn't let go.
Her eyes that pulled him under
and held him so.



Rodney and Candace graduated about the same time and wasted no time in planning their lives together. Cuddled up with morning coffee, they'd often talk about their families, their future, getting married, and doing things right. They'd talk about their hopes and dreams and worries and fears. They talked contently and listened intently. Much of the talk was about their careers and how important they are — not as important as being together, but *too important to have kids right now*. Or so she often said, so convincingly he agreed. Still, Rodney wanted a child someday and secretly he hoped that one day she'd change her mind. *It's just a matter of time before she feels the same. She's a woman, after all*, he assured himself. Rodney assured himself of so many things.



In the distance, Rodney sees something faint along the horizon. Something rising up from the land like ancient gods or beasts that live just below the surface and only come out with the moon. He steps on the gas. The 72' Cutlass speeds along, raw and throaty like the land around her. Distance shrinks. Huge, towering shapes meld into focus. Rodney

strains his neck to look out the car window. Redrock sentinels stand guard over a sweeping landscape. With royal posture and lush crowns of gold and green, they salute the heavens. Others, simple peasants, are hunched over working the land. Some are plump and friendly, others thorny and reckless, poking at the sky like teenagers looking for a thrill.



Rodney floors the gas. Tires grab onto road, muscles clutch to bone. Road and rock, giants and sky, like memories and expectations, all speed by and blur along the periphery. In a flash, everything changes gear and turns inside out. Blood and gas pump hard and fast, without thought, without hesitation, just pure exhilaration. *Still not enough.*

So Rodney pushes the line, the limit, and anything else he can cross. He lets loose a battle-cry, *FULL STEAM AHEAD!* as metal and flesh grab onto anything they can, shake furiously, and threaten to break apart. Everything else just blurs — from the road behind to the road ahead. Only the moment survives, pure and simple, recklessly alive playing this close to death. Rodney screams on. He finally understands why people race cars, jump out of planes, and fall madly in love. Falling is the easy part, he tells himself as suddenly, thoughts of self-preservation and the sharp curve ahead bring the 72' Cutlass to a screeching stop. He barely saw it coming.



Rodney never saw it coming. Was blinded the way a deer on a dark road gets trapped in a car's headlights, and then it's too late. Blames himself, but knows that won't bring her back. It's too late now and too much fell apart. Too many whispers left unattended, too many passions unprovoked. Too many harsh words were spoken until slowly, like poison, they found their way into the heart.

Rodney finally got up. The tile had nothing left to say and now it was his turn. He sat down at the kitchen table, the same one where she wrote her final letter, and began crafting his 'New Beginnings' letter, alternately titled 'We Can Make It Work' among other titles. It wasn't enough. He thought words could bring her back. As if words were



enough to matter. As if they could open a heart long-closed. What good were words now, Rodney thought — just foolish specks of dust floating in a desperate night. As if.



Mostly, Rodney likes the way things run together here — the way water runs over earth, earth runs into sky, sky melts with light, and day melts into night. And how it all melts together over time running toward forever. Back in LA, forever was just a year and some change. Not here. Forever means something in this place. Rodney felt that if he hung around long enough, he might just figure it out. He also knew he couldn't stay too long. Otherwise, he'd end up another roadside attraction — blurred by speed, rooted in clouds and drifting into dust.

After some meandering about which may have been months, maybe years, Rodney landed in Winslow, AZ — a small town close to *nowhere*. Found a low-paying but challenging job, took up writing classes at the local community college, and for the most part kept to himself. And every chance he could he'd roll out toward horizon to visit ancient rock gods and the silver-backed snake at their feet.



Somewhere down the road, the happy couple stopped talking contently, stopped listening intently. Wasn't enough time for that. They were *do-ers* doing it, *go-getters* getting it. They knew what they want, and knew how to get it. Candace prided herself in her ability to multitask. If she wasn't doing more than one thing at a time, then she wasn't trying hard enough. Rodney grew more like her, hers being the stronger personality. They didn't expect much, just the simple things that every young, successful American couple wants: a high-paying job, a 3-bedroom house, 2 late-model cars, a timeshare by the sea, lots of places to go and things to do, lots of people to do it with, some chic stores to shop in, fine restaurants to dine in, a museum to stay up on art, a college close by to stay smart, and a gym nearby to stay fit. Nothing much, but perhaps there was more.

Outside too big for insides to grow.

Things meant to feel replaced with things to know.

No time for anything, too caught up in the show.

No room for everything, so something had to go.



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Sometime later, Rodney finds an old, crumpled wedding photo down the backseat of his car, now a *Classic Cutlass* that he can't bear to part with. He can't remember how the photo got there, but it's one of those wallet shots they used to give out to friends. He remembers the scene: Malibu Beach at sunset, still in full dress — Rodney in a crisp black-and-white tuxedo, Candace flowing white from head to toe. They laughed the whole time, whole-hearted laughing, and tried to look natural while the sand and sea assaulted them. Rodney stared a little longer at the photo. He knew it was time.

He carried the photo upstairs, sat down at his desk and pulled out a crisp white sheet of paper. Once he started, he couldn't stop. The ink ran out like blood spilling from a wound still open. He couldn't stop, and didn't want to stop, until everything inside spilled out.

Rodney tucked the letter inside an envelope that he addressed 'To Candace', sealed it, and headed back downstairs. He got in his *classic* and rolled out of town. Watched the streets and small buildings of Winslow, Arizona fade inside his rearview mirror. Watched the road open up and the sky unfold. Watched an eagle soar overhead, and then opened the window to hear its cry. Rodney soared right alongside. He felt the wind and the warmth of the sun on his face. Felt his own breath and the beat of his heart. Felt the salt of his tears and the weight of years rise into thin air, and quietly disappear.

An hour later Rodney arrived and stood alongside a lead-colored snake with a slippery back, a nameless snake he now called friend. He held out the letter over the white-capped water and without pause, he let go. He watched the sharp edges and bold words slip away with the current, slip away like memory. Watched as the words diluted and the paper struggled to stay afloat until finally, she grabbed it and pulled it under with no signs of letting go. And while some words dissolved in water, others, only whispers, floated in the wind. *Thanks old friend. Now we both have a place to go.*



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