



Part of a series of short stories “Routes 1&9” by Ivan Robertson. Produced by Tommy Weir of Janey Pictures.

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Brackendale

We drove in the rain without saying anything. Susan stared out at the mountains and listened to the radio. I drove.

“I have to pee,” she said.

“There’ll be a place soon.”

It was cold inside the truck. I had patched up what I could with silver gaffer’s tape but the tape was beginning to peel. Susan had brought along an old army blanket and she stayed wrapped up in it.

“I have to pee now.”

We stopped picking up Los Angeles stations the night before, and I had mentioned turning around. She didn’t want to, though, and it was her decision to make. Instead she found a Country and Western station from Sloatsburg and lit a cigarette.

“Drive on,” she had said, and I followed the red lights of a Safeway truck out of California.

In the truck stop Susan had the atlas unfolded on the table and studied the Interstate. Behind her, in the next booth over, our waitress sat across from an old man in a baseball cap. When she spoke to the man she pointed at him with sharp red fingernails.

“She’s sick and she ought to be in the hospital,” she was saying. “Or at least be seeing a doctor. This isn’t some flu you know, Joseph.”

Susan ran her finger along the Interstate from the bottom of Oregon to the top, trying to guess our time.

1 “Around twelve hours?” she asked.

“There’s a chart in back,” I said. “It didn’t take us twelve hours to get to San Francisco.”

The waitress kept pointing at the man.

“You’re acting like this is all just going to disappear,” she said. “But it won’t. It won’t. She’s not going to get better without professional help.”

“The chart says nine hours,” Susan said. “Nine and a half.”

“It’ll be dark before then. We’re not driving that long. We can stop in Portland.”

“No.”

“Then where?” I asked.

“Further up. We’ll stop in Seattle.”

“No. Not unless you’re driving.”

“I’m not driving,” she said.

“Then we’re staying in Portland. I’m not driving thirteen hours today, no way.”

“Longview, then.”

“Where’s that?”

“Right across the Columbia,” She pointed it out on the atlas. “Like forty more miles.”

“No. Susan? No.”

She looked down at the atlas again and closed it.

“Fine, Portland then.”

The man in the baseball cap was drinking a beer out of a brown bottle. Whenever the waitress spoke to him he squinted down the bottle neck, embarrassed. Susan reached into her denim jacket for money.

“I hate this fucking trip,” she said.

Susan’s brother Gary first went to jail when she was nine and the family had just moved west. He was seventeen and nobody had heard from him in almost a year. They found him in Texas, passed out in somebody else’s Oldsmobile. He went to jail for that, and when he got out he came home to Los Angeles. He left again when Susan was twelve or thirteen, pretty much for good.

The family would get postcards from different places, different states. When Susan was sixteen he came back to California and two months later he was married to a girl from El Cajon named Jenny. He worked for her father in a Home Depot, moving lumber around and mixing paint. When she was seventeen he went to jail for good, for something a lot worse than stealing cars. And the family said nothing, they didn’t know what to say.

There was a letter, from Gary to Susan, on the dashboard of my truck. He’d never written her before, never her directly. He sent along his mailing address and his numbers. He said

he wanted to make amends, he said he needed his family. He sent his love and he said, “Write back.”

Susan read the letter over and over, all the way up to Portland.

Susan sat cross-legged on the motel bed in front of the TV. She had the sound off and flipping through the channels.

“What’re you looking for?”

“Nothing. Something to watch.”

The motel was a string of one-room houses circling the parking lot and a pool. From the window I could see the truck with its blue tarp stretched over the bed. There was a long arcing crack in the windshield.

“Do me a favor, huh?”

“What?” I asked. I didn’t turn around.

“Go find us some beer. I could really use a beer.”

She stopped flipping the channels on the news.

“Where?”

“I don’t know. Ask the guy in the front office. I’ll buy if you fly.”

“You’re staying here?”

“I’m sick of that truck,” she said. “Please?”

She handed me a crumpled ten and turned towards the news. There was a church on fire and she turned the volume up.

When I got back the room was dark and the news was over. Susan was curled up on the bed, asleep. A man on the TV was showing an X-ray to another man. They both nodded gravely. I sat down next to Susan in the dark.

“Hey, wake up. I got the beer.”

She rolled over but her eyes were closed.

“Wake up. The bed’s on fire.”

“Tom?”

“I got the beer.”

“I was dreaming about Gary. You woke me up.”

“What about Gary?”

She sat up and looked at the TV.

“I don’t remember. Something about a dog, I forget. What time is it?”

“Around eight, eight-thirty.”

“You got the beer?”

I gave her a can and opened one for myself. Foam burst out and spilled over my hand onto the bed.

“Shit.”

I wiped my hand on my jeans.

“Did you tell him we were coming? In the dream, I mean?”

“I wasn’t in the dream. I was just watching. I couldn’t tell him anything.”

“How’d he look?”

“Same as he always looked. Beat up, tired. Drunk” She opened her beer and drank. “He looked old.”

The next morning we ate pancakes across the road from the motel. The local paper expected the rain to continue. Susan read the horoscope.

“Don’t expect too much today,” she said.

“Who, me?”

“Both of us.”

She called her mom while I packed up the truck. The clerk was watching TV in the front office when I paid him. The news was on again, and they were showing the same church they had shown the night before, now charred and hollowed out.

“Arson, they think it was,” the clerk told me.

We sat in the parking lot for a minute, watching the rain hit the windshield. Susan lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the glass.

“We should be there tomorrow,” I said.

The engine caught and we pulled out onto the highway.

“I know.”

Billboards stood out along the Interstate, advertising motels and restaurants sixty miles away. An old man on the radio was calling in from John’s Branch. He was a logger, he said. A retired one. All his sons were loggers, his daughters were loggers’ wives, and as far as he was concerned they were all being robbed blind. Susan slept in her blanket with my sunglasses on.

It was my uncle's truck, I was just borrowing it. I told him we had to go to a funeral, that one of Susan's cousins was being buried. I didn't want to explain Gary to him. It sounded stupid if I tried to explain it. So I said her cousin had been stabbed in a bar fight and bled to death before the ambulance arrived.

"Sure, take the damn thing. I'm not using it. I'm warning you, though, it's old. Take it over sixty and the whole thing starts shaking."

"Thanks."

"You need money?"

"No."

"Well, that's something."

Susan jerked away suddenly and took off the sunglasses. She looked out the windows, rubbed her eyes, and turned to me.

"Where are we?"

"A couple of hours south of Seattle."

"What time is it?"

"Somewhere around three. I'm not sure."

"Oh." She tossed the sunglasses on the dashboard. "Did we pass any rest stops?"

"A couple, yeah."

"Well, pull over at the next one, OK?"

"OK."

Brackendale from **Routes 1&9** collection of short stories

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