



# Routes 1&9

Ivan Robertson

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

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## Summer Job

When I was eighteen and just out of High School I took a job at the local gas station. It was an old Standard Station that was pretty close to home, close enough to walk anyway, and I worked there thirty hours a week. I was going to use the money for college, for books and food. The manager, a guy named Cliff, would come by at the end of my shift and collect the receipts, but other than that I was on my own. That whole summer my hands smelled like gasoline.

I'd spend most of my time sitting in the little cinder-block office, waiting for cars. It was air conditioned in there, and I'd hang out, listening to the radio and staring out at the pumps. They had a little TV in there but I never turned it on. Hours could pass by without anybody stopping in. The phone never rang unless it was my Mom, wanting me to pick up something on the way home. Milk or something.

I never liked baseball much but sometimes it was the only thing on, and so I was kind of following Cincinnati. Towards the end of the summer, in August, the Reds and Atlanta were playing a day game and I sat there like always, sniffing at the gasoline smell on my fingers. A Malibu with Tennessee plates pulled up to the pumps and stopped. It was spray-painted flat black and the hubcaps were gone. I stood to go outside when the driver's door opened and a man got out. It took him a while, he was stiff and it looked like he'd been driving for a

long time. I stood in the doorway, waiting. When he stretched back he caught me looking at him. He smiled.

"Howdy," he called out.

"Hi."

He was a big man, bigger than me, and he moved slow. He had short blond hair under a beat-up baseball cap that said EARLSFORD LUMBER on it. He had a beard, too, a little darker than the hair on his head. He wore baggy jeans and a red t-shirt.

"Man, oh man," he said, still looking at me. "Life on the road, you know? Wear a man down."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Take my word for it. Wear a man right down. Down to the ground." He looked into the car for a second, slammed his door shut. "Use your bathroom?"

"Sure."

I walked back into the office and got the key. It was connected to a flat piece of wood that read MENS. He was in the doorway when I turned around.

"Here you go, Sir." I handed the key to him. He held it in his hand a minute. He had big hands.

"Where's it at?"

"Around the side, second door in."

"Second door in. Thanks."

He walked off and I glanced at the phone. Then I looked at the Malibu sitting out there by the pumps. The engine was still ticking, and the heat rose off the hood in waves.

I could hear the bathroom door slam behind him and the sink water run. I glanced at the phone again and closed my eyes. After a couple of minutes I heard the bathroom door slam again and his boots tapping along the raised sidewalk back towards the office. He stopped at the doorway. His face and beard were dripping water.

“Just you here all alone?” He asked. He held the key tight in his hand.

“There’s two other guys, should be back in a minute.” I looked at him. “Just went to get some food.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Could I get the, uh...”

“Oh, yeah. Here,” he held out his hand with the key in it. “Thanks.”

I took it and hung it back on the wall. He turned and headed back to his car, slowly. I stood in the doorway and crossed my arms.

“You need any gas, Sir?”

“What?” He turned around, walking backwards towards his car.

“Gas.”

“In due time, Buddy. In due time.”

He got to the car, opened the doors, and started pulling out garbage. Papers, cups, empty Coke cans, a busted Styrofoam cooler lid. He walked each armful to an open garbage can and dumped it, then went back for more. I could hear him talking to himself.

“An awful mess. An awful mess.”

When he was done he closed the doors and squinted over at me. He wasn’t smiling. He mumbled something, then shook his head. I unfolded my arms and let them fall to my sides.

“Could use that gas now, Buddy,” he called. I walked out towards him while he waited. “Just regular unleaded, the cheap stuff. Goddamn, it’s hot.”

He was sweating through his T-shirt.

“Yeah.”

“Been driving all the way from McAlester, ain’t yet come across weather this hot. This takes the cake.”

“Where’s McAlester?” I unhooked pump four and had started filling the tank.

“Oklahoma,” he said. “McAlester’s in Oklahoma.”

“Uh-huh,” I said. The pump hummed behind me.

“Anyway, it’s hot. And I could use a Coke. You got a machine in there? You gotta have a Coke machine.”

He looked around and spotted the machine inside the office.

“Don’t know why I didn’t see it before. Damn. This heat, you know? I’m gonna get me a Coke. You want anything?”

“I’ll help you in a minute,” I said.

“Don’t need any help with a damn Coke machine.” He walked straight through the open door of the office. I watched him as he stood in front of the machine and stuck his hands in his jeans for change. He found some, pumped it into the

machine, and pressed the button. The can clunked to the bottom.

The gas smell rose up into my face. I listened to the whirring of the pump's meter. It seemed to take forever. Finally it shut off. I topped it off to fifteen and put the nozzle back in its catch. While I was screwing the cap back in I glanced up and saw the man looking around the office with the Coke in his hand. He was looking for something.

"Shit. Oh, shit."

I hurried back over to him, calling out. "It's fifteen even, Sir."

He looked up and watched me enter.

"Came out to fifteen even."

He kept looking at me.

"Fifteen?"

"Uh-huh."

"There's those fucking Arabs for you," he drank from his soda. The radio was playing a tire commercial.

"Yeah, well..."

"These friends of yours, these two guys that work here with you, shouldn't they be back by now?"

"Uh...they should be, yeah."

"Yeah," he said. "Fifteen, huh? Damn, it's hot. Man on the radio said it's a hundred and four at Riverfront. Imagine playing a ballgame in that? No thank you. Nice and cool in here, though."

He drank more from his Coke. He was leaning up against the office desk with his eyes nearly closed.

"Yeah, well..."

"Just let me finish my drink here, Bud. Then we'll get down to business. I'm exhausted, really just worn to the bone. Been driving for days, all the way from McAlester through here and I still got a long way to go. Got to be in Philadelphia tomorrow. Tomorrow night."

"Philadelphia."

"You bet. City of Brotherly Love. Wife's out there, with her sister."

"Uh-huh," I didn't know what else to say.

"Shit, those two. Get them together, forget it. Eight o'clock tomorrow night." He paused. "How old are you, Buddy?"

"Seventeen."

"Seventeen. You still in school?"

"Just out."

He thought about that and drank some more.

"You going to college? You look like you'd be going to college."

I looked out at his car, sitting there.

"Going to college this fall."

He drained his Coke and set the empty can down on the desk.

"Well, that's something,," he said. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a wadded up ball of money. He found a twenty and handed it to me. "Fifteen, you said?"

“Yes, sir.” I reached into my coveralls and pulled out a crumpled five. I smoothed it out and handed it to him. He shoved it back in his jeans with the rest of his money.

“Everybody wants some,” he sang softly. “Everybody wants some.”

He rocked himself off the desk and made his way towards the door. He walked across the lot to the Malibu, opened the door, and stood still for a minute. He looked at me from over the roof of his car.

“Hey, Buddy,” he called. “I don’t think those other fellas are coming back.”

He laughed and got in. He started the engine, honked the horn twice, and squealed off loudly. I closed my eyes and leaned against the door jam.

The Reds were winning.

***Summer Job*** from ***Routes 1&9*** collection of short stories

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