



End of Miles

A selection of writings from members
of the FrankBlack.net forum

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Introduction:

During the early stages of this project's conception a theme was decided upon and following that a title. The theme is a recurring motif that is present throughout the music that unites all of the authors that have contributed and was loosely designated as "on the road". The title was polled and democratically decided and this is how we arrived at End Of Miles.

It was commented on that End Of Miles felt too final. It was suggested that "on the road" was too loose a theme. I had some concerns that this was going to go absolutely nowhere. The end before the beginning, the beginning of the end.

My concerns however were completely unfounded.

What we have in End of Miles is an impressive body of work comprised solely of writing and artwork by members of the [Frank Black Forum](#). The forum as a community has undertaken some impressive projects in the past. The visual forum itself is testament to the way members work together to improve the site and another notable undertaking has been the two astounding tribute albums created by forum members. The site is run by members for members with members in mind which makes it fairly unique in terms of fan forums. This community spirit has been both enhanced and captured by End of Miles.

The idea behind an ebook was to utilise some of the literary and graphical talents of forum members and to collate them into one source which could be enjoyed by all. Whilst we have many established authors on the site the call was also made to those who have never strung words together for such a purpose. I hoped that this exercise would install some confidence in those who were unsure of their own talents. I hoped also that it would just show people how much pleasure can be derived from creating just for the sake of it. I understand how unnerving it can be when self doubt kicks in and if I had a pound for every email I have received during this project that began "I'll understand if it's not good enough" I would have at least, ooh, five pounds. But, I would defy anyone reading End of Miles to point out which of the contributions are from seasoned writers and which are from complete novices. I would put money on them not being able to get it right.

End of Miles has been massively enjoyable to compile and I hope you, dear reader, derive just as much pleasure reading it.

Special thanks go out to forum members Llamadance for all his help and advice during the creative process and the extremely talented [Blackfrancis Can](#) for creation of the cover and graphics throughout End of Miles.

Thank you for reading.

Tre

Ashes:

It was cold outside. Sometimes you're in your bed, snug under the duvet, like a babe in the womb never wanting to leave, but you know the time is near. You peek over the edge of the covers at the window and it seems unnaturally bright, snow. It's quiet too as the snow deadens the sound of the world – holding on to its own blanket.

With a huge effort like a final contraction I threw back the duvet and jumped on to the floor, shivering. Padding softly to the window and inching back the curtains as has become my daily ritual, I see my suspicions confirmed. Everywhere white, everywhere grey, the sky mirrored on the ground drifting off over the view. Cars on the street sit covered and insulated, trees holding out their branches as if reaching for some semblance of warmth in the distant houses. There's a low rumbling and I realised my stomach is nudging me on. Turning, I grabbed my towel as I left the bedroom, turned right and down the green, carpeted stairs to the bathroom. Instinctively I flicked the light switch but nothing happened. Cursing, I looked out of the hall window at the neighbouring houses. No lights, no signs of life. A world still sleeping. Going into the bathroom I turned on the shower and waited for the water to warm up. Thankfully the central heating is on gas.

My stomach gave me another nudge, but it hasn't got a chance in hell. I can't eat for at least another two hours, can't even drink. My stomach doesn't know its own mind, much less mine, but that doesn't mean it's given up the fight. No, there are other ways the intestines can fight back, and five minutes later I'm standing under steaming hot water, trying to think of anything but the journey I've got to make in an hour. I keep telling myself it won't be so bad, that I've done worse, been through worse before, but it doesn't wash. The bathroom is grey too now, the steam moving in swirls and eddies, silently churning like my stomach.

I towelled my hair dry, moved down my body quickly in rough, staccato movements and walked through the screaming mist to the sink. My toothbrush is there, waiting like a sentry to do the first of its twice daily duties. The tooth paste, its antimatter, lies in a twisted, crumpled heap by the tap. I put the two together, and POW!, the dry mouth vanished, the thin tartar film on my teeth is obliterated and my breath is sweeter. The mouthwash is like the varnish finish, protection all day long. WHAM! It took my breath away and reinforced it. It'll take more than sugar to break down that wall. The routine demands deodorant and hair gel, and that's what the routine gets. Today is not the day to break that drill, not that it matters really, but you never know.

Upstairs to get dressed and I flick the battery powered radio on, in the hope that there's something coming through the airwaves, but all I get is static. Trying to navigate through the spectrum as I'm pulling on my trousers results in some kind of warped dance, like I'm trying to entreat the gods to give me music at all costs, but the gods can't hear or they don't answer.

I decided to leave early, the drive isn't normally a long one, maybe twenty minutes or so through villages and countryside, but sometimes an errant tractor or suicidal sheep can hold everything up, plus there's the snow. As I opened the door, I braced myself for the chill and stepped out, stopping as soon as my feet touch concrete. There's no cold, icy blast, there's no soft crunch of the snow underneath my boots, my heel passed right through and hit the ground. I bent down and picked up a handful ofash, fine like silk and soft as wool. Everything, covered in ash. Hardly believing it, I put my finger to my mouth to taste, half expecting snow to bite my tongue. A cloying, dusty mixture sat on my tongue until I spat it out, forming a tiny, glistening marble as it hit the ash and rolled. Looking around, the ash covers everything, just as I thought the snow had. Except my car. It stood shining and red, a drop of blood on pale skin, waiting for me. There's no going back, no escape, I thought. I walked through the ash, scuffing it along the path in trails behind me.

Getting into my car, I wrinkled my nose, resolving to track down the source of the odour permeating it. The engine started first time, launching the windscreen wipers into action, a

remnant of the rain I'd driven through last night. Turning out of my road, the streets were deserted. No people, no tracks to follow. I was blazing a trail for everyone else, yet I hoped no one followed. It took a moment to realise that the radio was on, but again just the harmless whisper of nothing was all that I could hear. I turned right onto the main road, accelerating a little too fast, sending ash up behind me in clouds. I smiled for the first time this morning, but as if it realised something was going badly wrong, my stomach growled and did somersaults, kick-starting my heart into trying to escape through my chest wall. Catching my breath, I focused on the road in front of me. Both sides of the road were covered in fine ash too. I could just make out the tips of blades of grass trying to push through, and the fences bordering the fields looked like they'd been clad in cotton wool. I nearly forgot to brake going round a bend as I looked further into the fields. On both sides were mounds of ash, big and small, still and silent as statues. In one field was maybe thirty or forty mounds, in another around fifteen. I fancied I saw one move, but it was just wishful thinking.

As the road moved to snake around the loch, my car followed and I looked across the water. It too was covered in ash, colourless and unmoving, the tide halted within like a giant crème brulee. Away from the loch again and I pushed the brakes gently readying to go under the red brick, arched bridge ahead. Too late I noticed it was a wall, a white wall, and suicidally I hit the accelerator and sped towards it. WHUMP! It was like a hand hitting a brand new duck feather pillow, but the car cut through to the other side. Ash started to come through the ventilation system, clinging to my eyes and lungs. Barely keeping the car straight and gasping for breath I brought the car to a stop in the middle of the road. I lurched out of the door coughing up gunk and wiping my eyes with my hands. All that served to do was to transfer more from my hands to my face. I unzipped my jacket and wiped my face with my t-shirt, eventually managing to clear my vision. Blinking, I looked around. The bridge behind me was still full of ash, as if nothing had ever touched it, but my tyre tracks were still there. I had never felt so alone and desperate as I did at that moment and as I walked back to the car, flakes started to fall from the sky. Flakes of ash filling the gaps behind me and the possibilities in front.

The engine was running and the outside of the car was still untouched, so I scrambled in and accelerated away, faster and faster round the corners and along the straights. Coming to the next village I barely slowed. I realised there was no one about, no one to hurt except myself and no one to stop me. Ash was coming down harder now, trying to fill space and suffocate all. I pushed on through the village and towards town.

My eyes and mouth were arid, lids and tongue sticking where they could. Blinking furiously to try and focus on the road ahead, I nearly missed the bend. The wheels slid on to the grass verge throwing up clouds, I jerked my hands to the right and then sharply to the left to straighten the car up. Slick with sweat, they barely held onto the wheel, but gave just enough purchase to steady the car on the road. Coming to the top of the hill above the town, it spread out before me like a Christmas card. The roofs were white, the roads were indistinguishable from the pavements, and trees looked like they carried the weight of the world upon them. Still the ash fell, thick and fast as if desperate to sterilize the earth and everything in it.

Slower through the town, that drop of blood now rolling down the skin like an alcoholics tear, nothing else moved. I could feel the fear building, my stomach churning, my heart thumping. My lungs strained for more oxygen, but no matter how deep the breath, there was never enough. Feeling light-headed now from a combination of fear and hunger, I was glad the journey was nearly over. I turned the car recklessly into the final road and pulled up at my destination. I switched the engine off. Still the ash came down, around the car, building a wall to keep me here.

How easy would it be to curl up and never move again, leave the ash to fall forever, silently. I'd be safe, I'd be warm. I'd be safe, I'd be warm. I'd be safe, I'd be warm. With an effort, I shook my self hypnosis away and lurched out of the car, leaving the keys hanging. Kicking through the ash I climbed the steps, up, up, up. Maybe a hundred, a thousand, my lungs and thighs burned together. Falling against the door at the top, I looked out across the whole world and fell backwards through it.

It was black, pitch dark. I couldn't hear or see anything. Fumbling around, I found a soft padded surface – a chair. I pulled myself on to it and sat down, waiting. Suddenly a bright light shone on my face, blinding me. Then a high pitched keening noise struck fear into my heart and mind, paralysing me. I was numb, unable to move, my rasping breath the only sign I was alive. It could have been seconds or hours. As suddenly as it had arrived the light vanished, plunging me into a black hole. Again the light, but this time closer, brighter. And warmer. I closed my eyes to shield them from the supernova but I could feel the heat building, practically inside my head. Sweat streaming down my forehead. Sure the light was about to incinerate me I screamed, a primal, guttural noise stripped of humanity, and the light vanished. There was nothing, just an absence of everything. Then my stomach growled and my heart pounded and my lungs sucked air into their vacuum.

I opened my eyes to find myself standing at the bottom of the steps facing my car, with the sun shining, the birds singing and a perfect smile on my face.

Llamadance



Poetry and Haiku:

Far away I will go
Returning when? I don't know
And I'll miss you badly while I'm gone
Now kiss me, hug me tightly
Know I'll call you nightly
Before long I'll be back at home
Leaving here tomorrow
And there'll be no sorrow
'Cause my dear I really love you so
Know I'd never leave you all alone

*

Leaving tomorrow
Wish I was gone already
Wandering suits me

*

Sunshine and blue skies
Full tank of gas, open road
I'm gonna miss you

*

On the interstate
Miles and miles of road ahead
Let's hear some Frank Black

*

Maps, truck stops, pay phones
Cheap food, people, scenery
On the long way home

*

On the road too long
Really miss my family
Destination – Home

GLENN GARRY GLENN ROSALYND:

(Rushing to Subway stop trying to catch the next subway. Misses it notices people noticing her slightly ruffled appearance, pulling out compact mirror and brush from her bag to make herself more presentable—uses next bit of dialogue to explain her obvious frustration)

Have you ever noticed how the loss of hair on a man's head is proportional to the gain of hair on his back? *(Notices she made a bad joke)*

Let me tell ya hun' ya shoulda seen the guy who shoved himself next to me on the bus. I'm standin' there, and all of a sudden this ape squishes next to me, and I feel like I've been fitted with a fur coat. 'Cept this one was clearly rotting away on the line. My stop was 20 minutes away, and honey I knew I would suffocate if I had to wait even 1 more minute. So, out of sheer desperation I leaped off at the next stop, and here I am trying to catch my breath.

Do you ever look back on your life, and wonder what was it you could have done to make yourself feel better right now?

You think you're a tease? We're all teases. You're a slut? So, what! Be a slut. You cheated on your husband? You did it. Live with it. You don't want the little shadows in your past to come back and haunt you? Then don't tell anybody. And certainly don't tell your mother. Women seem to have an undying need to get justification for their actions from other women. But get over it. Be a tiger and a saint. You're a human being not an icon.

You know, sometimes I just don't get this whole food thing...Women talk about ice-cream like it's the most sinful, orgasmic experience. Have you ever had a man goin' down on you in bed, and all you could think of was the pint of Rocky Road sittin' in the freezer waiting for you as soon as he's done? That pint of Rocky Road will just leave you 5 pounds heavier; but that orgasm?--Light as a feather. How many orgasms I had the last time I ate ice-cream? You know what? I don't remember. *(suggested stage note: light a cigarette)*

But for me, there was this one time...I'm lyin' in bed, basking in the afterglow of one hell of an orgasm, and he gets up and leaves the room. I think he's just going to use the bathroom, but he comes back with two lit cigarettes in his hand, and he hands me one without a word, and we lounge across my bed laughing, talking— smoking. It's these things we don't forget. I'd give a hundred orgasms, hell a hundred double fudge, whipped cream on top, sundaes, for that moment again.

What makes moments like that? And when is a moment? And do we really realize when one is happening? We spend our whole lives waiting for that moment to happen, for someone else to give us the opportunity. So what do we do? We wait!! We wait by the phone. We wait for commitment. We wait for the weekend, so we can go out and be fabulous and forget the week. We wait to wear that certain dress 'til we've lost just two more pounds. We wait for a sale, so we can afford that pair of shoes, which or course, are going to make us that much more desirable. We wait for that break in all the chaos, maybe just a day off from work to indulge in our dreams.

But when that day arrives, what do you do? You say there's laundry to be done. Then there's the dishes, and then there's the stamps you gotta buy, and you're out of milk, and you've gotta get in a workout. And it's 6 o'clock, and now you have to get ready for your 8 o'clock dinner date. You accomplish so much. Why do you feel so empty? How can you live your dreams when you don't have clean underwear? These things! These things! They clutter up our life, but what d'ya gonna do?

Honour your dream? For me, this involves more than just one piddly day off. My dreams are not measured in time, but by the risks I take to accomplish them. It doesn't matter what everyone else is doing as long as I can say, "I did this!" Falling in love, speaking your mind, singing out loud, wearing that dress that might get a little too much attention... These are the things that we deserve, but we hold ourselves on that leash. We're afraid. We don't relax.

I don't know. I don't know. Listen to me. Here I am rattling to you, and I don't even know your name. Forgive me. My name is Rickie.

You know I don't know if you would be interested, but I have something here you might want to look at.....(takes out property brochures)

MosleyK



Road Trip – Fallajua:

land of two rivers
Black Francis wrote
about floating down one

now all that floats
is hate, torture and death

where men are dogs
where war is god

small patch of land
home of black gold
and a camp named chaos

the blood of allah
the blood of jesus
the blood of big oil

Frontline the Insurgency
shows a land out of reason

“he worked in the airport...
they killed the translator
in the street
they killed the jeweler
In the cinema”

seven severed heads placed on seven bodies
the note left
said anyone moving the bodies
their fate will be the same

the blood of allah
the blood of jesus
the blood of big oil

they cut open his stomach
and put bombs inside

now the children are bombers
and others get fat
some children are dying
and others with attention deficit

it's all written on a wall

the blood of jesus
the blood of allah
the blood of big oil

so the land of two rivers
is the land of al Queda
the battle of oil field
not hope, freedom and stripes

it's just a big giant coffin
where men are dogs
and war is god
it's not really a country
but a Heart full of Darkness

the blood of allah
the blood of jesus
the blood of one god
and not the blood of big oil

is spilled
in the name of petroleum
and Operation Iraqi Freedom/Fuckdom

while most of those across the sea
would never dare tread a foot
or spot this on a map
while they play violent video war hero games
and drive their SUV's
with "WE SUPPORT OUR TROOPS"
emblazoned on one side

This is NOT an act of Allah
This is NOT an act of Jesus
This is NOT an act of GOD
But IT IS an act of the (c)rude

some how we all pay for it
if it's through blood in fact
or blood in theory
grief,
collateral damage
or
in every paycheck
that little part
that pays the IRS
to keep up the pillaging

This is NOT an act of Allah
This is NOT an act of Jesus
This is NOT an act of GOD
But IT IS an act of the (c)rude

Daisy Girl



Bus Driver

*The wheels on the bus go round and round
Round and round
round and round
the wheels on the bus go round and round
All day long*

Alright. I'm Dave. I drive a bus. The wheels on my bus go round and round. I drive my bus all day long. Its wheels go round and round, *all day long*.

Driving a bus isn't half as boring as you might think it is. There's a *lot* of excitement to be had. Like the time when a teenage girl tried to use a bus pass that clearly didn't belong to her. "That's not you in the photo!" I cried - and it wasn't just because she had a different haircut or something silly like that. I can assure you that I'm well trained in matching people to their photos, however different they may appear. They test for it in bus driving school, you see. I pretty much perfected it. I even passed the notoriously difficult surprise test that they spring on you; the one that only a handful of bus drivers across the country have passed. Picture this: An attractive young woman with long brunette hair steps onto your bus and presents you with a bus pass. Sounds like something you'd experience pretty often as a bus driver, right? But what's this? On the bus pass is a photo of a man. A bald man, with a ginger beard. It really threw me at first, but I could see it in her eyes. *I used to be a man*. The eyes never lie - even with those new coloured contacts some people have these days. I let her on the bus without any objection. Graduating from bus driving school with First Class Honours wasn't the only good thing to come from my decision to let her on, either - it also earned me life-long membership with the Elite Bus Driver's Society. It's amazing how far being in such a Society can take you. A lot farther than a return to the city centre, anyway.

anon

Alien Lands:

Familiar red soil beneath his feet
The traveller stands regarding
A sky of blue, so pretty too
Reminding him of his parting

Stumbling through the alien land
Decoding the ancient runes
Discovered truths ages unheard
A smile in spite of its weight

Thinking on what he must do
Home calls for rebirth
Carbon air, elements rare
And salt water falls to the Earth

[Dean Katsiris](#)



Regions and Markers:

Infinite topics from infinite places
Endless words from endless faces
Bustling hubub hustling belongings
A quick-danced waltz short on fawning

Corners converge
Trails in the sky
The pathways where the traders fly

All walks and runs
All regions and markers
Together they dwell in unnumbered lockers

A thousand strangers on pints converse
Forgetting they're gathered to disperse

[Dean Katsiris](#)

Afternoon walk:

The grey afternoon, the wind, and the promise of rain; The day is in full swing and the crowds mill thru each other dispersing like gaseous clouds, these coloured odours seem formless when viewed en mass. Buses pass by and then one arrives, swinging into the lane and slowing to a stop. He watches the others get on the bus. He stands back and inspects the seats thru the window from outside the bus. Too many people, he thought. Pulling a cigarette from his pack, he waits for another less crowded bus. He gets a look of himself in the window of shop. He watches himself light his cigarette. He starts walking. The bus never gets less crowded. His steps hypnotize him. He begins to fade in and out of a daydream.

She was beside him, sleeping. It was their last night. He knew that the when the sun rose it was over. And so for the next few blocks he dreamt about being awake while she slept, as the sun crept closer to the horizon. That moment he tried now to hold again.

He kept smoking. He kept walking. The memories kept pace with him.

He stopped half way across the bridge, and saw the ocean open its arms to him as to remind him that emptiness was without limit. He remembers reaching out to her and pulling her close to him, and she fit perfectly in his arms, and he felt her breath against neck. She woke and she looked at him. For a moment she looked his eyes and then closed her eyes and fell back to sleep. The room was still dark. The light slowly broke in.

He woke from his daydream as he dropped his cigarette over the side of the bridge. He watched it fall, it disappeared from sight before he could witness it hit the water and float away. He turned and walked on. At the other side of the bridge he caught a bus the rest of the way home. It was crowded.

- wilsmyth



Snakes In The Grass Roam Absolutely

Free:

David doesn't *like* public transport. The invariably late-running engineering works on a Monday morning, the ravaging hordes attacking the seats like hyenas starved for a week. The smell of weekend showered off hangs almost tangibly, and whatever camaraderie you might expect from sleepy compatriots in a similar predicament is buried in a sea of white headphones, which hang like pale vines in a forest. But then, one's not supposed to enjoy one's journey to the office: after all, it's a journey to the office, and this is not an enjoyable thing.

Least of all for David, but the last thing he would advise someone is to drive into town and enervate themselves before the working day has even begun. Driving is something to be relished, not merely a convenience, he surmises. As he slowly coats himself with invisible black particles on his commute, he pictures himself in driving gloves on the open road, wind in his hair, bugs ending their days on his windscreen. Perhaps along the Californian coast, or across Europe, anywhere but London on a rainy summer's Monday morning.

David was going on a road trip – destination: anywhere. That wasn't strictly true, it was destination: Cardiff, for a work conference – David had long ago decided that in order to counterbalance the drudgery of having to attend a work conference near Cardiff, he would make a road trip out of it. Rarely could he afford the opportunity to leave London, and like all born Londoners, David harboured a fear of the countryside; he didn't really understand it, much less trust it. But as he recorded a tape of a couple of albums he wanted to listen to on the journey, he reflected this was something he could work through, that probably cows weren't as filled with cold, silent, malicious intent as they appeared. Watering his window-box a little more than usual, and absent-mindedly picking off any wilting petals, he looked out at the post-downpour clouds slowly sidling away and decided that this trip was good for him.

In his defence, David had a romantic tendency that verged on the side of melodrama, which naturally leant itself to these overblown statements. After all, this was a two-day conference with a stay over in a bed and breakfast, and a roughly three-hour journey, assuming no stopping at the Severn Bridge services. However, as he packed an overnight bag, fleshing it out with CD's and books, David felt a little nervousness in the pit of his belly. To meet him, you wouldn't expect these wistful, introspective moments: David was a fairly outgoing character, even genially expansive when the mood took him, a confident and successful young man. But then you never know someone, really, do you? David was prone to internal monologues to rival a Shakespearean soliloquy in eloquence and structure, but could reduce the syllable count of his speech at will, if company demanded it. As he was planning his road trip, he was thinking.

Getting out of London will refresh me. I haven't been on a road trip in far too long, and seeing the countryside will inspire and fulfil me. What peace awaits me! What stillness and calm, what fresh air to fill my lungs. To see dew on the ground that hasn't been crushed underfoot by the time I leave; to see hills without houses on all sides; to see animals that run away from you when you approach and don't sit and look at you sardonically until they turn away in mild disgust. Maybe to see lambs, or calves, or some other sort of baby animal! That's got to refresh my soul, to reinvigorate me. I'm almost dreading the thought of returning to London, with its dark smokestacks silhouetted against the ever-hazy, never-starry night sky. It's peculiar smell, it's peculiar people.

I told you had a tendency towards the overblown.

He put his bag on the back seat of his Ford Focus and cracked his knuckles. He was starting early, to get a good day's driving in. He'd refuelled the day before (he didn't know when he'd see a Tesco again, and he wanted his Clubcard points) and was all set. He ran back inside and

fetches a bottle of water from the fridge, returns to the car and makes sure the tube of fruit pastilles he'd bought at the petrol station was where he'd left it. Turning the key, he felt a familiar surge: this was where he belonged, behind the wheel of a mid-priced commuter's car, the city boy heading to the country. He likened himself to Withnail, perhaps not so elegantly wasted but certainly the thespian heading into the unknown for the rejuvenation of the soul. *Maybe I'll visit a tea shop*, he thought.

Driving through familiar territory at six in the morning was a good start – North London passed by in a flash, then North-West, then West as he approached the A4. He'd resolved to avoid the motorway, to take in perhaps a little countryside en route before reaching the bed and breakfast, where he planned to leave his belongings before joining his fellow delegates at the conference centre. A thought occurred to him – maybe he could take in the teashop on the way to get lunch. This was going to be great.

The A4 is a surprisingly uninteresting road, at least for the first part: it winds past the uniform, flat-pack towns of the Surrey/Berkshire London borders before taking a route not all that dissimilar to the M4, just slower. David, though, was in his element. A little after crossing the orbital, he'd pulled over and put on the leather driving gloves a former girlfriend had bought him. The experience was completed by opening the windows and sunroof to an increasingly sunny Thursday and getting back on the still fairly open road.

He caught his first tractor shortly after he'd left the main road. The romantic in him told him that this was countryside life at its most typical, shouting down his more pragmatic, where-can-I-overtake side with its more flowery, aesthetic language. He sat close behind the tractor, unable to see the driver's lazy arm waving him to overtake, until it pulled into a field and David trundled past, glad that he hadn't obstructed the countryside in its duty. The tractor driver pulled back onto the road after him, and carried on to his destination. David didn't notice. Instead, he kept driving and indeed saw the hills and even some deer in a field, mentally ticking off boxes as he went.

He reached the small town near Cardiff later than expected and had to skip lunch and eat fill the large gap with conference centre baguettes. When the session finished, he persuaded some delegates that he'd met at the last conference (in London) to go to a local pub for dinner, no hard task. As his friends nodded at each other in approval of the local brew, David ate his pie with relish, noticing with satisfaction the cartwheel above the bar, and the generally rustic feel of the place.

He slept well in the blue room, with its two bedside lamps, its dressing table (who has a dressing table now, except bed and breakfasts?) and then its satisfyingly generous breakfast. The conference was less interesting still on the second day but had the advantage of finishing at 2 o'clock, leaving time for a little relaxation in the Welsh style, which meant again hitting the pub. If you trap some overworked conference delegates from certain industries in an environment with alcohol, and leave to ferment, then chaos will ensue and sure enough, sooner rather than later the countryside inn was heaving with striped-shirted IT executives quaffing pints of local ale in a distinctly rapid fashion. David resisted more than one until he came to the conclusion that he could take up the proprietor's offer of a night extra in the B&B, and he joined in the bawdiness.

The songs were echoing amongst the dusty rafters and David was in his element. Pint pot held aloft by its handle, he held forth at the antique bar and expounded his theories on life, the universe and everything. He was leading in song; dragging the not unwilling locals into his Friday night and surveying his beautiful carnage with satisfied, but still to be satiated eyes. As the evening progressed he placed an empty glass on the bar and weaved his way to the gents. Before he reached the door with the ram's skull above it – which until now had gone unnoticed – his squinting eyes fastened upon a site that had, like the ram's head, gone unnoticed. At the table by this door sat a lone girl, the most beautiful creature that David had ever laid his eyes upon. He stood still, unaware of his original trajectory, and stared – he'd never seen anyone like her. *That's definitely not the drink speaking*, he thought, *I am bowled off my feet, I am swept away*. He sat down beside the girl and said hello.

At the bar, three conference delegates deep in conversation suddenly became distracted from their discussion. A change of tenor had come across the tone in the room; not so much an increase or a decrease in volume, more an imperceptible change of attitude. They couldn't place their finger on it, and didn't want to say anything to each other in case they were revealed to be paranoid, so they turned back to resume their conversation. As they did so, four young men in jeans and t-shirts clapped them on the back and leaned in conspiratorially.

"Will you come with us?"

"Where are you going?" said one of the delegates, not unreasonably.

"Going for a ride, like. Will you join us?"

If the delegates had looked up, they would have seen other young men in jeans leaning in to groups of slightly disquieted delegates.

"There's talk of a party..."

The young delegates were not so perplexed as to turn down an invitation like this, however. Various of them made their way out of the pub with local arms around them, until about five of them, including David, who didn't quite know how or why he was out in the cold Welsh air, were stood in the car park.

Soon the five young men were in the back of a pick-up, hurtling down a single-track at a speed just shy of that which would be required to throw them out. Through trees they could see glimpses of a spitting bonfire. One of them, still well out of range of sobriety, yelled "barbeque!" to sustained whooping from the others. The locals smiled to themselves.

David woke up alone and naked in a ditch. He tried to move his arm and almost cried out with pain – looking down, there were very localised burn marks across the whole of his fore arm, accompanied by yellowing bruises and dried blood. As he slowly stood up, he saw matching burns on the other arm and when he tried to walk, he could feel them on his back. He made his way slowly out of the ditch and stood up straight on the side of the road.

When he woke up the second time, there were children poking at him with a stick. He opened his eyes. They looked at him with familiarity, but little sympathy before walking off. David looked at the blood on his front: it seemed to be in places unrelated to his own cuts, suggesting its former home was not himself. As he drifted off back to unconsciousness, he made a suggestion to himself. *Note to self. Road trips are a bad idea. Stick to the paths, David. Stick to the paths.*

[Cheeseman1000](#)

Cairo's song:

When she was young she'd sneak
Out of her bed at night
And look at her father's books
She couldn't read a word
But to move outside this place and time
Pictures were all it took

Her heart broke in two
When the sun came out and formed
The morning dew on the grass outside
She'd climb back into bed
Visions tumbled in her head
Of the pharaohs and their demise

keep it all to yourself, hold it all inside

All through her teenage years
Egypt helped her overcome her fears
like candlelight
Some people have their faith
Others have their drugs, but Cairo
Kept her crutch inside

*keep it all to yourself, hold it all inside
one day you'll see yourself swimming down the Nile*

Life passed her by with time
Wounds healed to scars
Her heart always in the past
What's left turns to dust
As flesh and blood must
Her wishes granted at last.

*don't keep it all to yourself, let it all outside
can't you see yourself swimming down the Nile*

anon



Not all Journeys are quite so literal:

I was pregnant once. True story. It's been weighing on my mind a lot recently which is what I was told I shouldn't let it do. This was a few years ago now and at the time I listened to the advice I was given and pushed it away. Locked it in a drawer. Pretended it didn't really happen.

So I was pregnant once but I only realised this when it was too late anyway. I was reading a book in my fathers armchair and I'd just had a coffee. I was reading a book and it was a bright summers day. It wasn't overbearingly hot, there were no portentous black clouds on the horizon, no indications or storms brewing, no crowing birds flying ominously overhead. There was no indication. No sign.

I hadn't had any feelings to suggest that my biology was any different than it was a month or even two months prior. Sometimes you hear stories of women who didn't realise they were carrying until five, six even nine months in. More often you'll hear of women who only find out when it is too late.

I thought I would have known, had a feeling. Anyone can skip a month sometimes. Hell, the tablets would sometimes give me three so how would I have known?

I knew when I saw though. When I put the book down and saw my legs. Then I knew something wasn't quite right.

I called the doctor and I called the nurse. I gave descriptives I never imagined myself giving. As their questions grew more disturbing more frequently the answer was yes.

It lasted about an two hours all told and then it was over. In the doctors surgery the next day they told me to come back if there was any pain so they could do a procedure but this early on it was probable it was all out. Anything left would be reabsorbed.

I cried a lot.

Best just not think about it, eh?

- anon

I've Seen Your Picture

I am sitting behind the wheel of a car, staring at a Walmart where I bought my new sleeping bag, on sale, for \$39.99. I hate supporting such an evil franchise store, but I need every bit of gas money I can scrape together. I am scrolling through my iPod trying to find a way to start this. Sometimes the shuffle function is so spot on my current mood it is scary, but today it is sadly lacking.

If I have everything figured out properly, I should be at my first destination by sundown. My grandfather is in the New Jersey Bowling Hall of Fame for being a pioneer in the Youth League movement, so I thought that would make a fine first stop. A few hundred miles south of here, the Hall of Fame is a place I've been meaning to see my whole life.

I knew I should've made a playlist before I left the house. What was I thinking? The first song of a trip is no doubt the most important one, how could I expect myself to think of it on the spot?

While I'm scrolling, an older man knocks on my window. "A dollar for the Knights of Columbus?" I roll down my window, and reaching into my pocket find that fucking Susan B. Anthony dollar I've been trying to get rid of for days. "Here you go," I say. I get a small plastic flower in return and a "God bless you, son." I put the flower on my rearview mirror, and get back to my scrolling.

As I scroll with my left hand, my right is tapping out a nervous beat on the dash. As I get lost in the seemingly endless list of songs I have no interest in hearing, my mind begins to wander aimlessly depending on what I see on the small LCD screen. Part of me wants to be predictable and play something road-trippy. But I'm not in that kind of mood. Wait, there it is: *Blonde on Blonde*. Dylan's *Honeycomb*.

Before I turn the car on, I unbuckle my seatbelt, exit the car and do my umpteenth trunk check. I know I have my address book, but it is not in the pouch I thought it was in. The momentary panic somewhat relaxes me – I don't need to focus on the drive ahead, because if I don't have my address book, I have to go back and find it. I check my messenger bag, find the address book, grab a Snapple from the cooler and climb back in.

My phone vibrates in my left front pocket. I pull it out – a text message from my brother, saying safe travels. I'll see him in a few days, as I pass through Chicago. He'll buy me dinner, give me a bottle of wine and try to talk me out of the move. He's always hated L.A., for reasons I never really understood. He's a stubborn son of a bitch, but a good man, and he tries his best. He'll put me up in the spare room for a few days, reminding me that I could find work here if I wanted, and that I could live with him for as long as I need to get a nest egg saved up. I pretend to consider it, but my mind is made up. Not that hanging out with Dave and Debbie is a bad thing – we watch their satellite TV and laugh about the last wedding we were at and how drunk Mom got. Debbie, will slip me some cash as we hug goodbye – Dave wants to, but can't bring himself to do this.

The Hall of Fame and Dave's place are the only scheduled stops I have. I'm going to try and catch a few ballgames along the way, and maybe try my hand at some poker in Vegas. Maybe I can finally use that Starbucks gift card I have. I don't know. All of a sudden this seems like a big mistake.

I put the key in the ignition, turn it, buckle my seat belt, hit play on the iPod, put my hand on the passenger's headrest, turn around, and back out. The last image of Littleton, New Hampshire I see is the big smiley yellow face of Walmart, casting positive thoughts and terrible worker's rights on the hood of my red Escort.

[Brian Salvatore](#)

I am the passenger:

I'm in my mid twenties now and often I'm asked the question: do you not want to learn how to drive? Invariably I will answer:

Some of us drive and some of us are driven.

I'd argue to anyone who wanted to get into this with me that this answer is mainly for comedic effect. There is, however, an underlying truth to this. If it were down to me I'd be an eternal passenger. In rare moments of honesty or when pressed by a particularly pushy questioner I'll confess to this. As predictable as my answer may be their lines of reasoning are more so. It usually boils down to freedom. Freedom to pick up and go wherever I like, whenever I like with whomever I like if anyone at all. As a passenger my options are limited and surely it's more hard work? I have to convince people to go where I want to. I might have to accept lifts from less than savoury individuals. My destination will be fixed.

Maybe all of that is true but I strongly suspect those who drive are forgetting the joy of being a passenger. Not having to make these decisions. Not knowing when next you'll get to go. Having no control over the destination or stop points whatsoever. Sometimes it's good to just let go.

I couldn't afford a car I will often counter. I couldn't invest the time or money in its upkeep. I couldn't learn how to drive right now.

In truth: I'm far too lazy. I don't want to spend out on a car when I'm happy enough in other peoples. I have no real need for one right now and while it might be nice to pick up and go at a moments notice I'm pretty sure the cost of trains and public transport I use in a year is far less than the average car owner spends on their mode of transport.

The honest truth: Some of us drive and some of us are driven and I *like* being the passenger.

Yes, OK, I have no real basis of comparison but what I do have is an extremely active imagination. I can't imagine that as one who drives I would get half as much pleasure as I do as the passenger. I like motorways in the rain. The predictable scenery and the rain on the wind shield. I like to be able to watch these things without worrying about the restrictions of the road. I like windy lanes in the summer. Tearing round the corners with the windows open and my head poking out. As one who drives I'd be far too terrified. I like inner cities at night. I like the street lights and the quiet. I like the freedom being the passenger gives me to take these things in.

When I was fifteen I read "On The Road" and like 50% of the people who read this book I had an urge to one day road trip across a vast and exotic landscape, or, failing that – America. Everyone knows this. If I don't learn to drive how on earth do I ever hope to achieve it they say.

I reply:

Some of us drive and some of us are driven. I'll just wait until someone wants to take me.

They don't understand. I'm not sure they ever will.

I really am very happy just being the passenger.

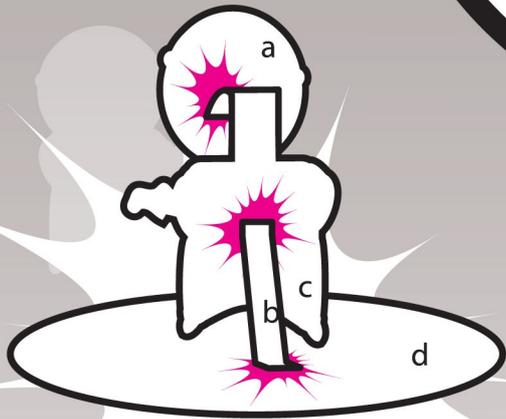
Anon

Going to the park,
going shopping,
or on holiday,
or to a gig..?

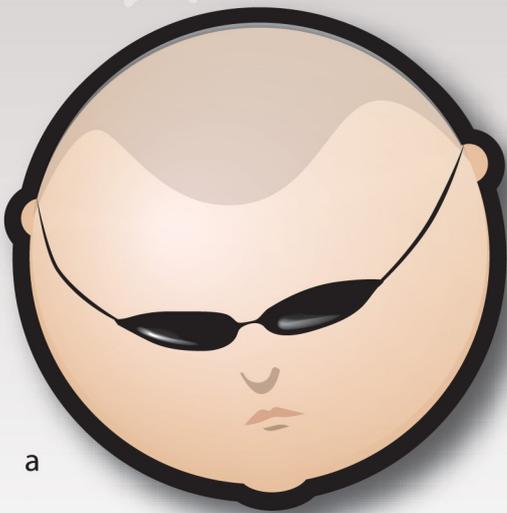
Wherever you go or
whatever you do, don't
forget to pack...

'li'l Frank Black..!'

Where will you
take li'l Frank..?



 = glue or tape



a



b



c

Down the Line:

Like the lonely tumbleweed she blew into the station at dawn.

She was part desert now. Dusty, dry, turned brown by the heat, cracked and aged like the oldest stone. And just as empty.

Everything was empty now. When was the last time she'd seen another human being? A month, six, a year?

She couldn't remember.

Would she ever see another face again, she wondered?

The only face in the station was on a wanted poster. An old bearded man who's crime had faded along with everything else.

Can't think that way, Amber told herself. You were lost in the desert and now you're lost out here. There's a reason, an answer here that you've come searching for.

'Can I help you there?'

Behind a tiny grill in the wall a tiny man sat fanning himself with the headlines of some lost and forgotten day.

'I...' Amber said, her words desert dry and choked.

Once this was easy, right? Everyday you opened your mouth and spoke to a hundred or more people. You smiled and you laughed and it wasn't deserts but green fields. Once you did all that.

In another upon a time, maybe. But things had changed and changed back again.

'Miss,' the tiny man asked, stopping his fan for a moment, 'are you in need of any help?'

She fumbled through her dress pocket, brought out the note and turned it in her hands.

On one side a number, the other side a simple declaration.

Say a little prayer. I'll meet you down the line.

And the name beneath, signed with clarity – John.

'Miss?' the tiny man said.

Who was John?

In the desert she had forgotten so many names. There was no need for names in the cruel heat and the frozen night.

But John?

Was that someone from before the heat and the cold nights? Someone she loved, maybe?

Someone who could help?

She couldn't remember. All that was in her head now was the dust and the long nights and now knowing why our how she came to be here this dawn, this station with the words in her hand.

'Miss, is that a ticket you've got there?' the tiny man asked.

Amber shrugged.

'I don't know,' she said.

'Here, let me take a look, come on now, don't be shy.'

He smiled and the desert was in his mouth. A line of broken rocks sticking up from dirty sand.

She passed the note over.

The tiny man turned the note in his tiny wrinkled hands.

'Ahh,' he said.

'What is it?'

'You've been here before, right?' He held the note up.

'I don't know.'

'Don't know? Come now, you bring in this claim ticket and you don't know? Oh, you've been here alright.'

And Amber wasn't even sure where here was. There had been a world before the desert, and now there was the world after. But between? She couldn't remember. She couldn't fathom the reasons why she'd been lost, or the reason why she had decided this morning to walk back into the world.

'Have you seen me before?' she asked.

'Can't say I have, but this,' he waved the note, 'this I do know. You wait right here and I'll fetch it for you.'

'Fetch what?'

But he was gone. Faded into a back room, behind a black door.
She watched the dust settle in his wake. Everything was dust here, sifting, sand in an hour glass.
Time to think.
Time to wonder.
Why was I out there in that desert? Why did I spend so many nights under those cold stars?
Her mind was as blank as the desert she'd left behind.
Maybe there were answers in what the tiny man had gone to retrieve?
What kind of answers though? Maybe there was a good enough reason to be lost? Reasons that didn't need to be known.
He brought with him a small box and blew the dust from its lid.
'Here you go,' he said and slid it through the grill towards her. 'What you've been looking for, I suppose.'
The box might once have contained shoes, it was roughly that size.
She touched the sides and pulled her hands away.
'Not going to take a peek inside?' the tiny man said.
And open the past, she presumed. For boxes weren't left in the desert heat just to collect dust. There was a reason, but she wasn't sure anymore if she wanted to know what that reason was.
'Been here forty days,' the tiny man said turning the ticket over, 'just sat there waiting for you to come in and collect.'
Amber ran her hands across the lid.
'Forty days?' she said.
'That's right. Now most folks they leave their baggage here, two weeks later they come back to pick it up. This though, longest I've ever seen anything left here. Must be something important, right?'
'Maybe,' she said.
It was important, she knew that without knowing why. And she knew that once opened there was no way to unopen what she found inside.
'So? What is it?' the tiny man asked.
'I don't know,' she said.
'You don't? Well how about we find out?'
The tiny man snaked his hands beneath the window grill and snatched the box.
Amber grabbed but found that her hands weren't tiny enough to pull the box back.
The tiny man shook the box. It rustled like leaves in an autumn wind. He put the box in his open palms and weighed it there.
'What's in here, feathers?' he asked. 'Let's see, shall we.'
He peeled back the lid.
'Well,' he said, 'that's not what I was expecting.'

Amber didn't want to look, didn't want to know anymore. For it could only be bad. You walked into the desert to get away, surely. And what would happen when you returned to that something you ran from?
'Now why would a young woman like you have something like this?' the tiny man said, tipping the box toward her.
Amber closed her eyes.
'This is yours, isn't it, miss?'
She heard the rustle of leaves blowing in the wind.
She wanted to be far away, lost again under cold night skies. Lost and not wanting to know.
'Miss? You gave me a ticket and now you've got to claim, that's the way it is.'
The box came back beneath the grill, opened.
You could run away, yes, back to the desert, lose yourself. Shiver at night, sweat blind in the day. Forget all this.
But how could she forget. The desert had driven her out to this faded place. The desert had rejected her, stripped her of memory and dropped her here to face the lost days of her past. There was nothing left to do but open her eyes.
She kept them closed.
'Are you playing some kind of joke, miss? Because if you are, it's not the least bit funny,' the tiny man said. 'This is yours, you claimed it, and I don't want it around here any longer.'

Amber kept the lids shut tight and tried to forget.
But it was no use, the tiny man wouldn't let her disappear.
'You take this now or I get someone here to dispose of it.'
Slowly, Amber opened her eyes.
At first she did not look at the box or its contents, but at the shriveled face of the man behind the grill.
There was no desert smile any longer. His tiny arms were folded across his weathered chest. His face set to stone.
'Take it,' he said, nodding at the box. 'Now.'
She groped for the box, her eyes still on him, and picked it up.
'Now take that thing and yourself out of here.'
What could he be talking about? What had turned him from smiles to crossed and folded arms?
Whatever was in the box it had enough power to change a man in a few seconds.
Too much power.
And this is my past, she thought. My history before the desert and stumbling lost into this morning. The history I must have wanted to forget.
You couldn't forget history when it was directly in front of your face. No avoiding the past when it was open and exposed in a box before you, no matter how hard you tried.
'Did you hear me, miss? Please get out of here,' the tiny man said.
But here in this desert faded station, Amber found herself frozen as though the night had come and the dark skies were above her once again.
The box in her hand was the fragile china of her lost past that she didn't want to find anymore. Moving would mean bringing that history to the front, revealing a past she had lost in the desert heat.
'Are you deaf?' the tiny man said.
'Please,' she said and could find no other words.
'What is wrong with you? Apart from the obvious,' the tiny man said. 'Take your disgusting little trinket and get out of here, right now.'
And when she couldn't move and couldn't reply, he stretched above the grill, pulled a chord and a shutter fell.
The bang of metal shocked her from her solid cold stance.
She jumped back.
And heard the autumn leaves rustle in the box.
Don't look, she told herself. Go, leave, throw the past away and walk back into that desert where you lost yourself the first time.
She took dainty steps, head held high and walked back into the bright morning.
Blinded for a moment she soon recovered sight and saw there the stretch of ocean sky going forever into the unknown distance. Below, that lost desert, what had once been a home before this day.
Was that home?
Being lost and not wanting to know?
Walk back there. Lose yourself again. Put down this history and don't look back.
Two steps forward resulted in three steps back.
The desert didn't want her any more.
It pushed her back with heat, with bright sun, it forced her to stay.
Can't go back, don't want to go forward, what do I do now?
Look?
Face your history?
It wasn't so easy. Just as the desert had pushed her back, now her thoughts pushed her eyes away from the box in her hands.
Look down, make it quick, rip the plaster in one go.
She forced her head down.
But gravity was twisted out here in the lonely desert. Fear pushed up, instead of down.
She looked up toward the sky before she could glance at the contents of the box.
This is stupid.
It's only a box, just a box. Whatever is inside you put it there didn't you?
She wasn't so sure about that. The tiny man hadn't known her and after he'd seen the box he never would. So who, if not her, had stored her past in the station ready to pick up forty days

later?

A name came to mind.

John?

Had John done this? The writer of the note, an unknown friend.

She remembered the words on the note.

Say a little prayer.

Prayer? Do I know a prayer that would fit this moment?

And like her forgotten past, so were holy words.

I must have known a prayer at one time. He wouldn't write those words if I hadn't known would he?

Whoever he was.

Think, think, there must be something in what this John wrote. Something you once knew and tried to forget. What's in this head of mine but the desert and the cold nights. There has to be something.

And the words came to her lips, slow at first, but soon gathering strength.

Hail Mary, full of grace...

Slowly she bowed her head, not in genuflection but now with a new strength given to her by the remembered words.

...pray for us sinners now...

I'm close, she thought. Face the past without fear, stare at my history in this little box left behind.

...and at the hour of our death...

She looked.

She saw.

She could not look away, she could not finish her words.

Inside the box was a single severed finger wrapped in torn paper.

There were questions, but before she got to ask them, she had answers.

The finger, that lonely little digit, belonged to Amber.

Too busy before trying not to look, she hadn't noticed her own hands. The hands that now held the box. On her left there was a finger missing. A stump in place of that digit.

Why?

Why would I do this? Why would anybody do this?

The bright sun became brighter, it sucked her in, she spun at the centre of its heat.

She stepped back, dropped the box to the ground and followed it down.

The box tipped on its side, the finger rolled onto the ground pointing back toward the desert she'd come from.

She wanted to look away, but she was fixed.

What did this mean? Why would I, or anybody else, leave this behind?

The world spun a little more, the sun brightened then faded in her eyes.

No, don't look away now. You can't look away now.

There were answers here, the finger pointed the way, answers she did not want to hear but the world, the sun and the desert couldn't be ignored any longer. Whatever had pushed her from that lost place wanted her to be found.

Pick yourself up. Pick that part of you from the floor. Find out. Find out.

She approached the finger like a frightened cat, jumping back as though it might rise up and attack.

But the finger remained, pointing forever into the lost distance.

Pick it up, or stand here the rest of the day looking. Stand here and wonder and wonder some more about why you came here and where you might be going.

With the fingers on her good hand, she pinched the finger and lifted it off the ground.

There, see, nothing to it. It's yours after all, nothing to be afraid of.

Except what it meant.

Nothing good could come of this. No sane person would drop a finger into a box ready to be picked up again.

I am sane though, aren't I?

Insane people don't ask themselves that question.

She turned the finger over.

The paper peeled away from the skin as she held the finger in her hand. Then, like an autumn leaf it dropped to the ground.

Amber stooped and picked it up.

Another note, another clue to the lost past?

No, not a note this time, but a ticket. A single, no return ticket with a time stamped on the front.

10:00.

Today, at 10 a train would arrive and now she knew why the finger had been left behind.

What better, or more forceful way to point the way than with this?

She giggled.

It was madness.

A note would have done, but no, she, or someone had left behind this finger to show the way forward.

She dropped the finger back into the box and held it close to her chest.

There was no resistance now. The desert had blown her here for this reason, and now she would let it blow her all the way down the line. At the end would be an answer, good or bad.

And this John?

Might he be there, waiting as he'd promised?

She did not know, but with the finger, the box, and the ticket in her hands she headed back toward the station and the tiny man.

The shutters were up.

The tiny man was fanning himself again. When he noticed her he stopped the fan and dropped the headlines to the ground.

'Didn't I tell you not to—'

'Yes,' she said, 'I'm going to leave.'

'You're doing a real terrible job of it, you know that?'

'Here,' she said, and slipped the ticket over to him. 'Will this get me out of here?'

He inspected the ticket.

'No,' he said.

'It won't.'

'It might have done a week ago, hell, five days, but not now. It's out of date.'

'But I have to...I need to get out of this place.'

'And take your little, that thing with you I suppose? What is it anyway? Why would a young girl like you leave something like that behind here?'

Before she'd been unsure, now she had the answer.

'A reminder,' she said.

'Couldn't have used a post-it note could you? Had to find a finger, did you?'

This is madness. And I'm part of that madness, no use fighting.

She giggled.

'Something funny.'

'I don't know,' Amber said.

'You don't know a lot, do you? You know what I know? I know that this ticket here is about as much use at that thing you have in the box with you there.'

And there it was, over before it had begun. The desert had pushed her here to this faded limbo and this tiny man. She would wait here forever, no way to go forward or back.

'Who's is that anyway?' the tiny man asked.

'This?' Amber said, shaking the box.

'Yes, that, what else would I be talking about? Where'd you get it from?'

Amber pulled her hand from beneath the box.

'It's mine,' she said.

The man crossed himself, painted Jesus the wrong way in the air and stepped back from the grill.

'Jesus! What kind of crazy are you?'

'I'm not crazy,' Amber said, but it didn't sound right.

If the world was crazy around you, then you couldn't help be crazy along with it, could you?.

'You know, I think I'm going to waver this ticket just this one time,' the tiny man said, reaching for a pad on the counter. 'I want you as far from me as possible. Far away. How's San Francisco sound? That's plenty far away, right?'

He scribbled out the ticket.

He pushed it across to her.

'There, one way, don't come back, ever. You take your madness some place else, agreed?'

'Are you sure?'

'This sure,' the tiny man said, and pulled the shutters down again.

Dust blew up into the air from the counter.

And she blew out with it onto the platform to wait for answers.

The train dusted its way through the desert toward the next town and there it stopped.

Bright children exploded across the platform, rushing this way and that. Worried mothers chased after. Father's tried not too look too bothered by it all.

This place wasn't so empty.

And yet, Amber felt lost again.

Is this the place where I get my answers, the end of the line? Will John be here?

She pressed her face against the window.

And there, not so bright, but smiling in amongst the crowd was a man.

A priest, dog-collared and shadowed in black.

The man waved at her.

John?

And now there was more sense to the note. Well, a priest would ask you to pray before everything else.

But why and how did she know this man?

Only one way to find that out.

She carried the box and herself out onto the platform.

'Joan,' the priest called her. 'You made it.'

And there was a smile, and that smile soon was shadowed by worry.

'Joan?' he said, getting close to her. 'Where are they?'

He grabbed her by the shoulders.

'Joan?' she said.

'Yes, where are the boys?' he said.

'My name is Amber,' she said.

'Let's not argue, just tell me where the boys are?'

'I...don't know.'

'What? How could you not know?'

'I...'

'What happened out there? What happened to the boys?'

When she didn't answer, the priest looked down to the box.

'Oh dear God, what is this now? What have you done to yourself?'

He snatched the box from her hand, and mouth open like the most forgetful goldfish he shook his head.

'This was not how it was supposed to be, not like this,' he said.

'What wasn't supposed to be,' she said, her voice rising. 'What was it I was supposed to do?'

'Are you joking with me?' he said.

'I don't know...what are you...what is this all...'

He narrowed his eyes, he looked to a place beyond her.

'You don't remember, do you? Do you?' he said.

'Remember what?'

'Come with me,' he said and dragged her from the platform out into a sleeping town that was just waking.

Cars passed by on the street.

There were sounds, and the sky only reached so far and where it finished there was a church. Its crucifix piercing the blue above.

'Where are we going?' Amber said.

'To wake you up, to make you remember before it's too late.'

And through the traffic he guided her, until they were both inside the church.

'Here,' he said, pointing to a wall covered in pictures. 'This is what you were, what you've got to remember.'

She drifted from him to the wall.

There were drawings there, children's scrawls of a woman with angel's wings, crowned by a bright pastel halo. And there were finger smudged deserts with yellow handed suns high

above. And there were boys, dressed all in white beside the woman, holding hands like a paper-cut and joined line of figures.

'What is this?' Amber said.

'It's you, you Joan.'

'My name isn't—'

'I know that, don't you think I know that? That's what we called you. That's what everyone called you. Joan of the Desert. Guided by God's voice. Sent to heal the world yet again. And yet...and yet...'

'Joan?' she said, the word foreign to her tongue.

'Yes, yes. We believed, you believed. You were sent to us by God. Sent, like Our Lord into the desert to fight temptation, to heal, to...'

He crossed himself. 'Oh dear God, what happened out there? What happened to the boys?'

She traced the drawings with her finger.

But it didn't help.

She could remember only the cold nights, and the hot days and then being blown out, blank and formless to the station.

'The boys?' she said.

'They went with you, oh, please, try to remember. God whispered in your ear and told you to take them out there. His Holy Son's. A shield of innocence. Please, try to remember.'

'I-I...I don't remember.'

'You must know something, anything, you've got to try, Joan. If anything bad has happened to them then...oh, dear God, I don't want to think about that.'

He turned his back to her, he mumbled a prayer, he crossed himself.

But she couldn't remember any boys, or the name he'd given her. Joan of the Desert?

Another madness to pile onto all the others that had come before?

This couldn't be.

Drawings on the wall, desert smudges, the prints of children mimicking the sun. She remembered none of it.

'How long?' she said.

'What?'

'How long have I been...when did I go?'

He shook his head. 'You walked in Jesus's steps, forty days, forty nights. Today was supposed to be the end. We were to tell the world, tell them all of how He was alive again.

But how can we when...when the boys are not here?' He got in close. 'Tell me, Joan, tell me that this wasn't simply madness? That this was something of His power?'

'I-I don't know,' she said.

'God save us,' he whispered. 'We've got to find those boys, find them and make sure they're safe.'

'How?' she said.

'We go, we go now.' He grabbed her hand.

'No, I can't go back there, it won't let me go back.'

He pulled her toward the church doors.

'You will. For the sake of those boys, for the sake of this Church. We can't come back with empty hands.'

She pulled away from him.

'No, you don't understand. I can't go back there. The desert...I can't go back.'

'You will, Joan. I won't have them say that I believed an insane woman. I won't have them mock my faith.'

'No,' she said.

'Yes, and yes again. You went there once, what stops you from going now?'

'I don't know,' she said.

'You keep saying that. But it's too late now. We have to find those boys.'

He pulled this time and she couldn't resist.

He pulled her out into the sun, then into a jeep, and then, an hour later they were parting desert sands on their feet.

'This is where we dropped you, where you and the boys said goodbye. This is where I gave my blessings. Here.'

But here was nowhere. One part of the desert that looked like the other parts.

Amber did not recognise this place.

'How do you know?' she said.
'There, look, that flag in the ground.'
And she saw the dark little flag, limp without wind.
'And see, here, footsteps. Yours, the boys, leading off into...come on.'
He pulled.
She pulled.
There was something in the lost and forgotten desert that kept her from moving. Another history? Another fragile thing easily broken?
'I can't.'
'Why?' the priest said.
'It's...a feeling.'
He pulled again.
'You will. You will for the sake of those boys. You will for the sake of the Church. If we have to lie to make them believe, then so be it. But you're coming along, Joan.'
She tried to pull back, but he was stronger now.
And they made their way, retracing steps in the sand, until the trail ended.
And they both stood.
And they both could not move.
For what was lost in the desert had been found.
'Dear God, please forgive us for we have been tempted and gave into that temptation,' the Priest said.
Amber had no words.
She had found what she had been looking for.
She closed her eyes.
She didn't want to look any longer.

[Youaintme](#)



You did what?

Johnny was always surrounded by a sort of oddness. He was a pied piper for the strange, a magnet for the weird and attractor of the generally not quite right. Every now and then he would disappear for a day or three and come back with some long story about his absence that if it were anyone else telling it you would never believe. He couldn't see it himself mind. He never understood why anyone found his little misadventures to be anything but normal. He would walk through the door as if he'd never been away and summarise his days in an offhanded couple of sentences. This always elicited the exact same response; I couldn't help it.

"You did what?"

"I joined the circus"

"Elaborate, please!"

"Well I met this girl at the bus stop and we both dropped our umbrellas. We bent down to pick them up and then knocked heads. Not hard; it didn't hurt or anything. This was pretty funny so after some furious apologising we got talking. I told her about the thing with my elbow, you know the thing...."

After a childhood accident Johnny had free rotation of his elbow. It was a little freaky to see a hinge joint behaving like a ball and socket. He likes to make full potential of the oddness of his elbow and will demonstrate it to anyone who asks. Anyone who doesn't ask as well if I'm honest.

"...and she told me she had bendy bones. I didn't believe her so she showed me. Right there at the bus stop. It was amazing she practically tied her leg into a knot. I thought it was brilliant so she showed me some more things. I tell you the other people at the bus stop looked disgusted; I honestly don't know what peoples problem is sometimes. I was dead jealous, I wish I had bendy bones but people see something different and they just freak out. It's absolute nosen...."

"Johnny!"

"Oh yeah, sorry, so she's still got her leg in a knot and she's showing me how far she can twist her head round, practically looking backwards when she sees the bus coming from the other direction. She tries to untie her leg and I try to help her up but the bus driver wouldn't wait and we both missed it. She looked absolutely gutted. I checked the time table and the next bus wasn't for an hour. Maria explained, that was her name by the way, that she now didn't have time to go into the city and shop and she might as well just go back home. She looked so miserable and I felt so awful for making her miss the bus I offered to buy her a cup of tea at the bakery round the corner from the bus stop. You know the one; they do those cakes with the strawberries and the little pastries with spinach in..."

Johnny could be pretty infuriating with his stories. His tendency to diverge off on unrelated tangents often caused me to glare until he got the point. I glared at this food diversion not wholly because of the unnecessary nature of it; I was a bit hungry.

"Sorry. So we went to the bakery for tea and continued our conversation. She was incredibly interesting, spoke seven different languages, so I offered to walk her home. Maria looked a little embarrassed and declined at first. I thought I might have made some social no no here but it was starting to get dark and I really didn't like the idea of her walking about at night on her own. That's when she told me what she did for a living; she's a performer in the circus. I don't know why she was so embarrassed, I thought it was brilliant. I mean, what little kid doesn't dream at some point of running off to join the circus?"

He had a point I must admit. I remember being seven years old being so unreasonably angry at my parents for making me go to bed early and packing a bag with the idea of running off to join the circus. I got caught in the back garden trying to stand on a bucket to unlock the back gate to access my new life. It was the excitable silly dog we had that gave me away, barking like a lunatic. I got carried up the stairs by my father who was lecturing me on the dangers of running away whilst my mother sat at the foot of the stairs creasing up with laughter. I remember thinking she wasn't taking me seriously. I had forgotten the next day about my plans to run away and forgiven my parents for their early night misdemeanour. My circus bag (crayons, two pairs of pyjamas, two t shirts and three pairs of socks) had been unpacked whilst I was asleep and that was that.

"I hadn't even seen any advertisements saying the circus were in town, apparently it was just a stop off point on their way south and they didn't plan it or have time to sort out a poster campaign. The guy in charge had a relative on the council so managed to get a short notice permission so they could put on an impromptu show. Might as well make money as sit idle I guess. They'd managed to set up real early in the morning so to boost morale the guy had let them all take the afternoon off which is why she was so gutted about missing the bus. She said you don't get many days off at the circus"

I remembered that I'd tried to run away to join the circus a year after the event when my parents took me to a one to celebrate my birthday. It was when the ring master was calling out the girls with horses that it came back to me. After the show when we were wandering around the fair I asked my mum if I could please have some candy floss. My father was trying to win me a goldfish in a bag at the time. When her back was turned I ran off to find the ring master. I caught a glimpse of his red satin coat as he went into a grubby looking caravan. I raced to the caravan and knocked politely on the door. The ringmaster didn't look quite so impressive in his shiny red trousers, black braces and a grubby white vest. Up close he looked very greasy. With his hat off it exposed the gleaming baldness on the top of his head and his big twirling moustache looked stuck on. I had knocked on his door with the express intention of asking him if I could join the circus but faced with this slimy looking tubby old man I ran directly back to where I came from. Mum still stood in line for candy floss talking to herself, talking to me I suppose, and dad still failing to win me a goldfish.

"We got there and she showed me her caravan, I tell you, it was nothing like those little things I used to go camping with my Nan in. Huge thing with three bedrooms, a living room and a tiny little kitchen and bathroom. She had all these impressive costumes and this caravan was just for her. She explained that her job was to get people to come into the show in the first place and to be a distraction around the fair. She could coil her legs around like a spring and pogo towards people leaflet in hand. She could throw her voice to passers by and since she joined the circus attendance had gone up 80% which is why she got her own caravan.

I got a tour of the place. I met a strong man, a bearded woman and a family of acrobats. There were tigers and horses and little dogs in sequined costumes. Maria wanted me to meet the clowns but you know how I feel about clowns"

He was terrified of them. Fair enough I think. Weird buggers.

"I got a little laminate which meant I could wander freely while Maria got ready to welcome the crowds and it also meant I got to watch the whole shebang for free! I had a hot dog and some candy floss from the little fair. I won a glittery hula-hoop from the hook a duck store which I thought I'd give Maria afterwards. The show was due to start at seven.."

"Which is when you were supposed to meet me to go to the cinema remember?"

"Sorry, I got pretty caught up in it all. It was the most violently alive circus I have ever been to."

Johnny's descriptives were sometimes as weird as the characters that he picked up along the

way but they were always fitting. I've heard him describe a city scene at night as luminously freckled or a mint choc chip ice cream as a chilly bitter-sweet.. I never say anything because I never want him to be self conscious about his odd turn of phrase because I for one love it. Once a guy I was dating (in my defence he seemed pretty normal up until this moment) pulled Johnny up on his odd turn of phrase. He laughed at him with tears rolling down his face whilst poor Johnny just looked hurt and confused. Needless to say that this guy was well and truly ditched.

"The big top was like the caricature circus tent of childhood dreams, it seemed a thousand foot high, curved and grand, striped in streaks of red and yellow. The light that blew from the tent flap doors had the same reassuring glow of a cottage open fire. It was such a happy night. I went in and everyone was laughing and smiling. There were acrobats on horses with feathered plumes and glittery saddles, the small dogs ran and gambolled on and off the backs of similarly garbed Shetlands, The trapeze artists flew through the air with trails of ribbons and glitter flying behind them. I felt like a kid I really did. I must have looked like such a fool grinning like an ape at all of this. Every now and then I'd see Maria bouncing around the crowds and I'd wave to her. The animals the acts, they went on and on and I didn't want them to ever end. I had to leave when the clowns came on though. You know how I feel about clowns."

I think we've covered that one

"Maria saw me leave so met me outside and offered me a cup of tea. I told her about the clowns and she said she wasn't totally comfortable with them either which made me feel a lot better. We went back to her caravan for some tea and a chat. I gave her the hula hoop which she loved and hung on the wall of her caravan. She had to go back and wave the crowds out but said I was welcome to stay in the caravan and help myself to tea until she was done. I was happy enough with that so while she went I made another cuppa, washed up the ones from earlier and listened to the radio for a bit. You know what my bladder's like so after three cups of tea and a large coke I was bursting. The bathroom in this caravan was pretty hard to manoeuvre. Unbelievably narrow, everything was in there but it was a tight fit."

I could imagine, Johnny wasn't exactly a small lad.

"So I, you know, and then tried to get out when the handle came off in my hands. I pushed the door but it just wasn't doing anything. I didn't want to break her caravan. I looked round for some thing to help me take the door off so I could get out. I tried everything you could think of. I tried to remove the door by unscrewing it with tweezers. I tried squirting soap into the locks it just wasn't happening. By this time it was after midnight and Maria still wasn't back. Not knowing what else to do I fell asleep in the bath. It's when I woke up I found out I had accidentally joined the circus."

Only Johnny.

"Maria found me in there in the morning. She'd gotten back late the night before and assumed I'd gone. Apparently she was pretty pissed that I'd just done a bunk. The circus wanted to move out that night and at first she'd complained about it but being pissed she decided it was for the best anyway. They drove all night and she'd only had two hours sleep. She went to take a shower and instead found me snoring in her bath. She let out a hell of a scream. I explained about the lock and she laughed so hard she cried. I laughed too I suppose it was pretty funny. It was only after a big cup of coffee and a couple of rounds of toast I thought to ask where we were."

I winced. I had a feeling I knew what was coming.

"The south of France! I had a fiver to my name and I was stuck in the south of France. I was in such a panic. Maria managed to calm me down a little and took me to see the circus master guy. They were in France for five days and then were going back to England afterwards. I'd stay and work for them for a while and they'd make a detour on their way through England to

drop me home. I'd stay in Maria's caravan and work with her on the jack in the box. So she.."

"Hold on Johnny, the what?"

"Oh, you're going to love this, it's so cool. So I told you Maria could coil her legs like a spring, right? She'd had this idea for the entrance to the circus which she called the jack in the box. She'd had a box made big enough for her to fit into and decorated it in green and purple. There was a big rotating handle on the side and the idea was the handle would be turned and turned until a big enough crowd had gathered around the box. At a key moment Maria would fling open the lid and leap out like a jack in the box showering circus leaflets to the gathered crowd. The guy in charge couldn't spare someone to turn the handle so the idea had been put on hold but in exchange for food and board I'd be the handle guy."

Quite frankly speechless at this one.

"So after having some food and a shower we went with the box into the town we were in. I don't remember what it's called you know what I'm like with names"

Awful.

"The strong man gave me some of his sons circus clothes to wear. His son was at university so didn't need them at the time. I had a purple satin suit with silver edging and a silver satin shirt and matching top hat. We set up in the town centre next to this little fountain. Maria got into the box and I turned the handle. When a crowd of about fifty was gathered I kicked the edge of the box and she sprang out. It was brilliant the crowds loved in and everyone bought a ticket. I went and got us coffee and we left it an hour before doing it all over again. We must have sold 200 tickets that afternoon which is apparently unheard of before a show. The circus guy was so pleased he said after the show had started Maria and I could have the rest of the evening off. We watched the show and it was just as great as the first time. We left before the clowns to go get some dinner because you know how I am with clowns"

As well as tangents Johnny had a leaning towards repetition.

"Once the show was over everything was taken down and tidied up faster than you would ever imagine. By half past one the whole show was on the road. I offered to drive but I don't think Maria trusted me to. I wanted to keep her company but she said she liked the quiet of the night time wagon so I should just go to sleep. I was kinda glad, I was pretty exhausted.

"So the next few days were the same. The Jack in the box was a great hit wherever we tried it and the circus master was convinced that this was the best way to draw in the crowds. Maria was so thrilled that her idea was working. It soon neared the time when we were approaching England again. The day before we got back was the biggest success of the Jack in the box. We sold 300 tickets on the basis of this alone. I have to admit I was having a great time. Circus people are so friendly, the food was great and the outfits I got to wear were spectacular. I even made friends with the clowns and you know how I feel about clowns."

I told you so.

"On the last night after the show was over and the place had been cleared up they left the tent up till last. I was helping get the horses down for the night when one of the clowns told me they wanted help getting the big top down. I went to help inside with the supports and everyone was in there! They had a party for me on my last night. I was really pretty moved I was close to tears I have to tell you. I said goodbye to everyone and thanked them and when it came to Maria and the circus master I had to choke back some serious crying. They offered me a job. Said I was doing so well and had fit right in I would always have a place in their circus. I was really very tempted."

"But you didn't?"

"No, well, no. They detoured to here this morning and I said one final goodbye and waved them all off. It was pretty hard. I had a great time."

For all of Johnny's adventures and misadventures, for every weird and wonderful character he picked up along his merry way, for all he happily blunders through Johnny always comes home. That's why I'm never worried because he always comes home and I'm glad. I would really bloody miss him.

"So, Johnny, no regrets?"

"Nah, it was brilliant but it's better this way I think. Always happy memories. They're coming back through in a few months, I got us guest tickets so you can meet them all."

"That sounds great. You must be exhausted, would you like a cup of tea? Oh hang on, we're out of milk..."

"I'll go get some. I'll be right back...."

[Tre](#)

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO PONG:

Though the 1970's were wrong in so many ways, Pong did not bat an eye, Pong came anyway. Pong invaded the bars because it had nowhere else to go. Far from the world's first video game, Pong was the shiny-screened birth of a brand new revolution. It was also largely ignored. Pong sat in the darkest, most out-of-the-way corner, and for a long while didn't make a sound. The curious few who stumbled over to it were too drunk to figure out how to turn it on. What did they care about some stupid machine, anyway? It was too new and too different and it came out of nowhere too fast, ambushing them. Pong did not make a good first impression. When conversation at the bar momentarily died and the men at the stools happened to glance over at the machine Pong seemed to smirk at them. Still, something about its futuristic look kept them wondering, wouldn't let them completely dismiss it. It sure as hell wasn't darts, whatever it was. Even if it was a little bit interesting no one wanted to be the first asshole who played it. Pong waited, content knowing that soon enough the men would come and it would belch beeps and blurps nearly nonstop. Like the lion that lazes all day long before exploding into action, Pong rested. Once things got rolling there would be no break until the revolution was either won or lost.

In addition to bar tending, Harry owned the bar. In the nine months since he took over The Alcojolic it had done much better than anyone, aside from Harry, expected. In the fifteen-years the bar existed pre-Harry it had never been anything special. And still wasn't. Harry had not invested a ton of money remodeling the place, but had spruced it up just enough to make a difference. He had also went out and bought a brand new jukebox, one loaded with all the latest hits, that lit up when you stuck a quarter in, and most importantly was louder than hell. Sounded good, too. And since he started pulling the crowds in, Harry made the assumption that his success was due to something he did. Never once giving thought to the notion that people simply might like him. That the same people had not liked the last owner. That personality could make the difference and that his bar had it in spades. No, there was no doubt in Harry's mind that purchasing the jukebox had been the key to his success.

The Pong machine was marked down. The salesman said they weren't selling nearly as well as expected. And Jesus had they manufactured a ton of them. Enough to market to parents as potential Christmas presents for their kids. Only the things were much too costly for that...Usually. "Except on the right day," said the salesman. "What day is this?"

"Tuesday," said Harry.

"Except on Tuesdays."

"Is that right?" Harry pushed another tumbler of Brandy at him and tried his best to look naive and helpless.

"I'd better not," the salesman said, eyeing the drink thirstily. "It's still afternoon and I've spent my beer money."

"Nonsense," said Harry. "Drinks are always on the house for salesman. Ask Mitch." Harry turned and found Mitch slumped over, head in arms, at the end of the bar. "Mitch ain't a salesman," Harry made sure to point out lest the salesman think he regularly fed free drinks to salesman to the point of unconsciousness. "Mitch is a drunk. Now tell me again why I would want this machine?"

Pong dozed as the first quarter was covertly slipped in. Some bozo trying to cue up Merle Haggard. The next couple coins nudged him half-awake, but were not enough to completely rouse him. It was not yet time. Pong slept deeply, dreaming in code.

The first game was played between a man named Jimmy and a man named Marcos. Classic international competition. There were other quarters put into the machine before this date, but this was the first successful game. It was not pretty. The game was held in the quiet of the 12:45 a.m. Sunday morning, fifteen minutes before closing. There were no spectators. There was no one else in the bar aside from Harry and Phil, the mentally-ill guy who seemed to grow a little less crazy the drunker he got, though never to the point of sanity. Harry grinned as he washed down the bar. His dream beginning.

"I've got money on the Hair Pie," Phil said to no one in particular.

Marcos got the hang of the game right away. It was nothing at all like learning English, and though nothing about the game was reminiscent of Panama, after the initial paddling of the blip he felt relaxed, felt like he was back at home. Across the table Jimmy cursed the game. Did not like being beat by Marcos as was so clearly happening right from the beginning. Back when no one would speak to the foreigner, when they'd only glare at him suspiciously, he had adopted Marcos as a friend; taking him in and helping when he needed help, which was often. To Jimmy, Marcos' lightning-quick wrists seemed ungrateful. It took very little time for Jimmy to lose and even less time for Marcos to coax him into another game, Marcos' treat, and beat him again. Harry watched the pair as he pushed chairs in and wiped the few tables down. It was closing time but he would stay as long as the Pong players wanted to stay. The beeps the machine emitted sounded every bit as cutting edge as the salesman had promised. The future full of plinking quarters.

There were no more games that inaugural night. Harry started to ring the two of their tabs up together before Jimmy spoke up. "You'll have to make it separate, tonight. I'm broke." Jimmy laughed without smiling. "My buddy here won all my money." Marcos offered to pay for both, but Jimmy waved him off. They left in the truck Jimmy always gave Marcos rides in.

What woke Pong was not the quarter dropping into it's slot, though that was nice, but the hands on the joystick. Two sets: the first impotent and lifeless. Pong had felt those before, had ignored them. They were worthless in partnering the revolution, would only make it fail. If those hands were representative of men there was no point in bothering in the first place. The second set of hands made all the difference in the world. Absolute maestros immediately paddling with authority. Intuitively, Pong hoped. That was the key. So there was promise again, after a long period of waiting, and yes, of doubts. The Seventies were still all wrong, but Pong was more at ease with them, their deficiencies that once irritated him, grew quaint. No matter Peter, Paul and Mary were no longer the acoustic force they once were, no matter the Manson killings, the fact that Bob Dylan had long since switched to electric, platform shoes, revolution, sweet revolution was in the air. Pong could not fucking wait.

[Bartholomew](#)

Middle of the Road (White Lines)

Do you ever find
That when you stare
Your eye is drawn
To the middle of the road

A daydream lost
A random thought
Leads me to
The middle of the road

The edge of minds
Peripheral vision
It's always there
The middle of the road

Some of us accept
Some of us seek
This stale position
This middle of the road

Hope will burn
And dreams you'll mourn
It's anaesthetic
The middle of the road

See yourself
And purge to listen
Embrace it whole
The middle of the road

So praise your chains
And praise your bonds
And praise of course
Your middle of the road

Anon



End of Miles – Six Word Story:

It is said that Ernest Hemingway considered the best story he ever wrote to be this:

For sale: baby shoes, never used

at exactly six words.

The following are the six word stories penned by [forum](#) members within the theme of end of miles.

Streaks of bright vivid colours, roadkill.

“Where are you heading, Stranger?”
“Nirvana.”

Forever white, in dark black night.

Travelled the world, went in circles.

Her future lay like addlepatented tendrils

Leaving home meant burning down bridges

Jet black river phoenix Arizona state

All cages are the same size

I just arrived where I departed

Don't call us. We'll call you

Out of gas hitching a ride

Last rest stop for 50 miles

Oh please, don't pull me over

I dream of a crimeless world

A storm made going further impossible

Just one hand on the wheel

Last words of a dying atheist

The lemon-scented road to redemption

Take the stairs, not the elevator



