

“The House on G-16”

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Coming home south from San Jose, there are two options: take the 5 Freeway south to Los Angeles, or the 1 down the coast. The two ways split from each other, leaving a swath of unknown California between. Last September I took the scenic route down the coast, glad to finally be done with all the meetings.

It's very pretty along that way. I've gone there before. You eventually pass through Big Sur with all the tall trees supplicating the ocean, driving carefully around perilous mountain bends where all speeds are too fast. That is, you do until you reach the large construction signs: ROAD CONSTRUCTION AHEAD - LONG DELAYS. It took only twenty minutes of sitting in a one-lane parking lot before my patience reserve scraped dry, and I swept the old but serviceable Explorer around in a tight circle and began to meander back up the 1.

I pulled over at one of those gas stations whose names you've never heard of, with two pumps and a Coke machine. I didn't want to drive another forty minutes back up to San Jose, *so let's see... well, the Thomas Guide shows a few roads that connect the 1 and the 5, called G-14, G-16...* I assumed the "G" stood for "Government", so that should be a government-built or maintained road. *Good enough for me; G-16 winds its way right down to the 5. It's about an hour, maybe. It's 4:00 now.*

The entrance to G-16 is shy and barely marked except for the official little triangle with the number, and it ribbons up through dry cliffs before spilling into a long, tree-crusting valley. It is quiet there, and suddenly the air of nearness to the sea vanishes, swallowed up by the hills. I found myself on a single lane road, barely paved, wondering if I'd made a wrong turn until the little reflector-dotted G-16 signs would slowly pass by. With the hills rising on all sides the afternoon became early evening, and the trees overhung the road as if to hide it from the sky. Everything grew here; only the asphalt underneath my tires hinted at human existence. Occasionally I would drive over steel grates that crossed the path, wondering what they were, until I realized they were intended to pop up as gates to keep cattle herds contained for safe crossing.

I drove, and my two pale stabs of luminescence felt along the road. The distance on the map shows a few miles, but not the truth of how long it takes to crackle along a narrow road that meanders and hairpins without reason. The sun was sinking now, leaving only a sky desperately hanging onto what light and warmth it could keep. I drove, and the trees watched. Houses passed by, if you could call them that. Houses that might have been built here, back when men looked for gold: of dark, reddened wood and sagging metal roofs, with no connection to the world. It was impossible to tell if the houses were lived in or

abandoned, for they hid among the trees with only an alarming shadow to name them, like a blanket thrown over a chair in an attic.

The Explorer dinged at me with its little light that said I was on reserve. *Fuck!* How long did I have? How far had I gone? Could I make it back to that gas station that may or may not have been open? Could I make it through to wherever G-16 gasps its last? There was no place to pull over, for the shoddy pavement ended at its sides and plunged down into little ditches. I had to stop, shut off the engine, and think for a moment.

I pulled out the Nokia and called Anne. I left half a message before the phone said *doot*. Low battery. Was this a cosmic joke, a minor punishment for the modern man? They make bad movies like this. All I needed was a castle on a hilltop and a lightning flash. *Fuck that, and fuck you, G-16. I'm staying right here, right in the middle of the road, with the doors locked. If someone happens to drive along this road, they can just hit me.*

I don't know how long I waited there. Four hours. Four minutes. Time had stopped passing in that place long ago, and I realized what it was that made it so different. I'd passed through rural areas before, but there had always been something to note the claim of humanity: trash, power lines, distant lights and radio towers, fences. None of that here. No electricity except for the rage of the

sky. No road except for what some crew had laid decades ago. I waited, and grew nervous, for when night came in that valley it came and removed everything.

Colors faded into shapes, then into vague impressions that tried to burn onto the eyes but failed. It was black and moonless, and stars failed to light the tall grasses that no wind moved. The sky was a lesser black, and only the outlines of hills and treetops defined themselves against its emptiness. I turned on the radio, and turned it back off, for every channel had abandoned me for a dead buzz. I waited, and breathed. I could hear my own breath.

A flashlight seems like a tiny, wild thing when it approaches from a distance, a handheld dog that stops to sniff at something and then dart ahead. It was ahead of me, slowly bobbing closer. I turned on the headlights, and saw the lower half of a pair of overalls and thick boots, plodding along the ditch next to the road. An old man came into view, very tall, with a body that used to be heavy but was now gaunt and loose, very little chin, and a limp. The hat had the earflaps down and said "Norco Trucking Co." He tramped up to my window but not so close as to appear threatening, and waved. The window went down halfway.

"You lost." A statement of fact rather than a question. The accent was far removed from California, molded from isolation.

"Yeah, yeah... and I'm just about out of gas, so I didn't know what to do." I felt stupid, and scenes from *Deliverance* stole through my mind. A knot of nervous energy gathered in my stomach, and I realized my bladder was full from the Starbucks cup that rattled empty in its holder.

"Need gas, 'n. Come up the driveway, maybe get you some." He turned and started back along the road, and I started up the Explorer, which sounded hushed and frightened to announce its presence. *This is insane. I'm going to die. Whatever. That's insane, too. He's a helpful man. Probably goes into "town" all the time. Have to live here somehow.* The SUV slowly buckled its way along the road, following the flashlight like a docile elephant, until the man turned left and limped up a twisted gravel path that could not be called a driveway. I pulled up in front of the house as he snapped on some sort of porch lantern.

The house held itself upright because there was nothing to knock it down. Old wood sagged and cracked atop moist dirt, following no known method of architecture. Ancient garden tools leaned against a wall, and a tired wind chime made from sticks hung in eternal silence. "C'mon in for a minute," said the old man, and stumped up to the screen door, which opened with the *reeeeet, whapp* of aged screen doors. I froze. I shook my head. I was strong, well-fed, exercised

regularly, and what was there to be afraid of? I closed the Explorer door with a chunk and walked up the concrete blocks that acted as steps. I entered.

A set crew for a Hollywood production would have been inspired, if they were making a movie with an abandoned farm shack. The house had two rooms, only by virtue of the wall that divided them, and gave off a faint reek of dust, old human and rotted plant. One room, probably the bedroom, was as black as outside, and the old man disappeared into it. Deep complaints sounded from the wood floor. I was left with a single wooden rocking chair that waited next to an old-fashioned iron-bellied stove. A small oak table carrying a faded green Coleman lantern and a box of iron nails lurked next to a tiny kitchen sink and two pictures. The painting of ducks erupting from a marsh sagged at an angle near the web-hung rafters. The photo, taken back when color was still new, stood on the kitchen sink; from it the old man and an old woman stared back. The woman's eyes were pinched and fierce, angry at Heaven, her white hair tied back into an excruciating bun; a face that refused joy in life.

"Oh, is that your wife?" I called, looking at the faded picture. My voice was muffled and coated with the thick air of the place. The old man stared, and the old woman glared. I lost, and looked away from her hateful face.

"Yuh." The old man faded back into this room, carrying a ring of keys and a battered steel gas can. "Fifty-se'en years my wife. Died 'bout a year back." He exited and let the screen door slam behind, leaving me inside for a heart-squeezing second. *Reeeet, whapp.* I chased after him. "Coo'nt afford no funeral, so she's buried out back."

Oh. Nice. That's great.

The old man limped around the side of the shack into night and pulled something heavy and clothlike off of something else. I descended the concrete blocks to the ground and hung to the flickering porch light like a moth, my arms gripping myself to keep the house off me, until he emerged, pushing an Indian motorcycle the color of wet rust. He heaved onto it and kicked it on, hanging the gas can around the aged chrome handlebars. The cycle coughed and died and coughed alive again. "You c'n sit inside if you want. I be back, few miles on a spell there's a station." With that he rolled down the gravel with a sound like fatty bacon spitting in a pan, and motored away, the yellow headlight hitting tree boles and hillsides, gas can banging.

I stared at his vanishing form, mind unable to grasp reality. He was gone. He was gone, and I stood shivering in front of his decayed house, in utter darkness

held away with a guttering porch lantern, with his dead wife buried behind the house.

The lamp sputtered, and went out.

I may have shrieked in the darkness, or babbled as I tore my keys from my pocket and pounded my way to where I knew the Explorer to be, felt along its hood until I reached the mirror, spent eternities stabbing the wrong keys against metal before I found the lock, yanked the door open and crashed inside like a child leaping over the gulf between him and the monster under the bed. Slammed the door, locked all four doors with a clunk. Sat with tears squeezing from my eyes until the angels and demons of my imagination stopped flapping around me and clutching at me.

I opened my eyes, and it seemed I hadn't. Pitch blackness is not natural to the human mind, and the eyes refuse to accept it, cones and rods bending and stretching to pull in anything to anchor the self. I found the ignition and turned it once to the right, and was gratified to see tiny electric colors waiting for me. They were bright and searing in the cold cabin. I leaned the seat back and checked all the doors again. The SUV was locked. I tried the radio again and the static said nothing except itself. I sat.

I sat, and sometimes glanced around me, trying to pick out the silhouettes of trees against the blackness. The stars seemed heavy in their places, not winking or shedding light. The silence as deep as the blackness. No insect spoke in this place. I think I had actually begun to doze, starting awake only when some distant animal barked. Exhaustion began to wash over me, and I lay my head back against the headrest, fighting away oblivion.

Reeeeet, whapp.

Eyes wide. Heart slamming against my chest, louder than anything. My breath caught, straining past my throat with a quiver. I looked helplessly against the black outside, listened to everything.

I waited, breathing because I had to, fingertips pushed into the flesh of my hand because they were shivering. I heard nothing. *An animal. An animal had come and pushed open the screen door, and gone inside. A dog, the old man has a dog, which had woken up in the bedroom and come outside. Imagination, because I had heard nothing.*

Then a slow, careful crunch on the gravel outside. Something had come out of the house, and moved toward me. A small noise escaped my throat, a high little keening. I could see it, or so I thought; the colored lights on my console blinded me, but I could not summon the courage to reach forward and turn the key to off,

or lean out to twist the headlights on. I pressed against the reclined seat. I had to urinate, badly. My heart threatened to lose its momentum and seize.

Crunch. It was moving to the right, around to the passenger side. My head turned, a little, striving desperately to *see*. The door was locked. It came up to the door, and something felt for the handle, lifted it up, pulled. The Explorer moved a little toward it. The handle was let go with a quiet click.

I gulped a breath and then went still, trying not to exist. A tiny crunch sounded to my right, and then the rear passenger door's latch was tried. Pull. Release. I waited, fevered brain wanting and failing to kick me into movement, into defense. Something thumped lightly against the side window. The gravel gave quiet rasps as it moved around behind. It did not try the hatch, perhaps did not recognize it as a door.

The left rear door. *My side.* The Explorer lurched as the door handle was pulled, then a loud knock as the handle was let go to snap against its niche. My face frozen. Anything but my door. Please don't touch my door. Please don't.

I hiccuped in fear as my door handle was tried. I couldn't look away from the blank, expressionless window, my fist bleeding from my teeth digging into it. Tug. Tug. Release. Then *the face* came up against the glass. White face, white hair. Her face. I was yelling at it, body spasming in my seat as it tried to escape, fingers

scrabbling for the keys and pulling the keys from the ignition by accident and dropping them to the floor and yelling and whimpering and moaning like a wild thing and shaking. I found them and jabbed them against the steering column, unable to find the slot again, other hand slapping the console trying to find the switch that would make the headlights blare into the night, ready to roar back out onto the paced road and take my chances, anywhere, away from here, looking to see and finding that the night had come again, and there was nothing. Nothing.

When the sound of the Indian's cough began to make itself heard, and its yellow light bobbed back up the gravel, I managed to find the headlights and snap them on. They battered the tired shack so brightly I could not look at it. The old man had to wait minutes before he could get me out of the SUV to open up the gas tank, and shook his head as I jumped at every sound and imagined motion in the dark. I didn't tell him, but thanked him and God for the needle that showed barely-a-sixth level in the tank, backed out, and left that place, sanity wounded, eyes bugging at tree shapes that leaned out at me and sudden glints of metal from old dead cars and fence posts.

When I had spilled out from the woods and onto the single lane steel bridge, and pulled into the Burger King parking lot where real, human shapes moved within, I shuddered out a breath. I swerved around the BK to the gas station and pulled up to the pump underneath the wonderfully bright buzzing fluorescents. I had been in a freaky, unfamiliar place. My imagination had taken me on a journey, was all. I had had the most intense dream on G-16.

It was not until I'd halfway filled the tank when I saw the small, woman-sized handprint on the rear right window.