



Running on Empty

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In a flash of revelation Lucas detached the hose from the spigot behind the trailer and duct-taped it around the exhaust of the ice cream truck. The other end he threaded through the cracked-open window and into the back, situating it next to the two KingKool chest freezers. The whole thing, this contraption, only took a few minutes to set up. He turned the key to the ignition before turning back inside to polish off the last of the strawberry vodka. By the time he stumbled out to the truck he could scarcely keep the plan straight or his legs grounded. It was as though he'd constructed a trap for himself. Only this one would save him. He threw wide the rear double-doors, stepped in, and slammed them closed in turn. The world behind his eyelids spiraled endlessly as he lay down along the rivets of the truck's bed.

A violent force reached down and pulled him to the surface of consciousness. He burst through the doors and spewed the contents of his stomach at the base of a pine tree, holding himself up on all fours. After a minute of retching he rose to his feet and kicked sand over the mess of mostly beer and bile, dusting over the foul-smell. He stared over at his truck. It was still, the

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engine dead. Dark fumes escaped at the seams on the roof where he had installed a giant fiberglass ice cream cone—strawberry soft serve with a single maraschino cherry. The truck was an old school bus, a short one. He'd got it cheap after Braeburn Middle School closed; he painted it white, accented with a pink stripe, and installed the industrial-grade freezers. A cavalcade of frozen treats framed the little window cut-out of the side of the bus. The tape holding the garden hose in place had turned to tar, melted and black. He yanked it free and left the residue wherever it settled.

There was a palmetto bug sitting on the crest of the railing leading up to his little home, a cabin lined with pale blue vinyl siding. It was skittering from one edge to the other when Lucas flicked it off. The property was a half-acre, but felt much vaster and desolate given how far his nearest neighbor was, a seemingly abandoned RV, long immobile. Though some nights he thought he heard footsteps treading through the woods. Occasionally he made out bright beams cutting through the dark he took to be flashlights. On these nights he'd keep his hunting rifle cradled in his left hand and pass out with a bottle in his right.

There was an old gas can under the sink, which he grabbed before heading out. Grass grew in dry patches around the sand in the shoulder of the two-lane road. Most homes were set back from the street, only indicated by rusted mailboxes sitting atop wooden spokes. The overbearing sun warmed his perennially tanned skin. He passed a row of old Buicks across from a plot pockmarked with antique sheds, a mobile home, and scattered sun-bleached lawn furniture. Ducks and chickens meandered across the dusty soil and pecked at God knows what.

The halfway point of the four-mile stretch was a water tower emblazoned with the American flag, the property of Mossy Head Water Works. As soon as he reached Route 90 he could see the trusty Sunoco sign. "The official fuel of NASCAR®," it read and underneath listed the price of unleaded gas and the price of Marlboro reds. The lot, covered with spiderwebs of cracked asphalt, was barren save two self-service pumps.

The first person he'd seen all day was the cashier. Neither betrayed the fact that they recognized each other. That they'd seen each other five or six times per week for the past four years. With a single twenty he put ten on pump one and bought a four-dollar bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon from the shabby stock of wine in the back aisle. Normally, he had the prescience to keep a stash but last night he'd managed to drink every last drop before retiring to that cool floor. With the crumpled receipt in hand he exited the store. In the hot sun he hit the button for diesel and filled the can until the pump clicked off after a few gallons.

The sign next door was supposed to be read vertically but he would always read it as, "Simply Country / Good Cooking." With his remaining \$5.79 he bought chicken fried steak fingers

with gravy and dropped the last eighteen cents into the plastic bucket with "tips" scrawled across it in black Sharpie. "Y'all take care," he said to Abby, the hostess, as he reached out to touch her arm and she recoiled.

On the walk home he drank enough to steady his trembling hand but not so much that he couldn't drive—about half the bottle. He poured the fuel into the ice cream truck, started it up, and drove back to the gas station to fill the rest of the tank. From there, he drove forty minutes south, towards the beach, passing through miles of pine before reaching anything resembling civilization. The bridge across the bay was a single-lane, stretched over nearly four miles of celestial blue water. A horizon of high-rise hotels sprouted from the earth as he grew closer.

He managed to find some street parking where he'd catch people as they walked from their rented condos or vacation homes to the shore, and vice versa. He poured his wine into a plastic cup and flipped the switched that played, "Turkey in the Straw," on loop out of an old boombox.

In an hour, he sold eight SpongeBobs, five Spider-Men, four Choco Tacos, a Tweety Bird and a Big Mississippi Mud. This was a light haul, but a few more and he'd have at least made enough to get back and enough wine to get through the night. A couple passed by dragging their girl by the hand. She was crying, muttering repeatedly that she didn't want to go in the ocean, she wanted to swim in the hotel pool. He hoped they might calm her down with some ice cream, unruly kids being a main driver of business, but no one in the family noticed him. People seemed less willing to buy ice cream from a truck these days, he thought.

He was eating a frostbitten Orange Dream Bar when a white kid asked for an Iron Man. "No dice," he said.

"Why?"

"I ain't have none of those Marvel characters."

"That's a double negative. That means you do have it. And Spider-Man is Marvel," the kid said.

"Sony got the rights to Spider-Man. And they sold the ice cream rights to Popsicle. Iron Man is Big Boy Concessions," he spit out. His left hand cut into the edge of the metal counter as he gripped it.

"You don't know what you're talking about," the kid said.

"Buy something or quit fucking talking to me," he said, and the kid puffed up his chest and stormed off. Satisfied, Lucas finished that last bit of the bar and licked the wooden stick clean.

The kid came back, his arms crossed tight, accompanied by his sunburned mom and a pale police officer.

"There a problem here?" the officer asked.

"No, sir," he said.

"This kid says you threatened him."

"No, sir, I haven't."

"Let me see your identification."

Lucas turned to open his glove compartment. He tripped over the empty wine bottle and sent it clanging across the floor. The officer took notice.

"You know public intoxication is a crime?"

"I'm not intoxicated in public," he said. "I'm in my truck."

"Is your truck running?"

He had to keep it running to power the freezers. "Come on, man. You know I'm not going nowhere," he pleaded.

"I'm going to need you to turn off your vehicle and step out with your hands visible."

"The ice cream—" he said, his shoulders deflated.

"Turn off your vehicle and step out with your hands visible."

He did as he was asked. The officer pushed him against the side of the truck and patted down every crevice of his body. Satisfied, the officer put cuffs around his wrists. The kid, held at his mother's side, watched as Lucas was placed in the back of the squad car and driven away.

The car took him back over the bay to the booking department. They patted him down again, the magistrate issued a bond of \$1,000, his photograph was added to the database, his fingerprints were scanned. The last time he was arrested here they used ink and he thought about the passage of time, how it can leave you behind. When they were done with him he was left in a holding cell, which was also different from the last time. The room had recently been redone so as to be suicide-proof—there weren't any linens and the bed itself was made of molded plastic with rounded edges. As he lay down he went over what would happen once this was all over. He'd have to pay to get his truck back, and even then they'd suspend his license and he wouldn't be able to drive it. Hours later he woke to the sound of some cop sliding back the metal bars. The clanking bounced around in his head.

From the payphone in the hall he dialed 1-800-COLLECT. Pressed 1 for English Assistance.

"Hey, it's me," he said when prompted, and waited as the call transferred. The next voice he heard was that of the synthesized operator.

"We're sorry, the party you were trying to reach is not available."

He redialed 1-800-COLLECT. Pressed 1 for English Assistance.

"Hey, it's me," he said when prompted, and waited as it transferred. This time the call connected. A small sigh of relief left his lips.

"Hey," he said. "I know. What you think? It ain't my fault. Cause it ain't. You know how these cops are. Mhmm. Yeah. Yup. Fine. There's a spot up under the floorboards down by the toilet. Under the rug. Ok. Cya." He hung up and was led back to the cell to wait once more.

His sister showed up sometime that night and posted bond. The clerk at the front desk returned his wallet and a cop showed him to the door. She was waiting in the parking lot.

Her eyes looked tired; her spaghetti-strap revealed a bruise on her shoulder. "I 'preciate it," he said. "You owe me, again," she snapped. "I'm keeping track," he said. They stared at each other, working backwards from the moment 'til they were two children hiding in a cornfield in the hazy past. Lucas took a step forward and they brought it in for a hug.

She dropped him off across town. At Cash's Liquors he picked up a bottle of gin. Wine got him into trouble, after all. He kept walking and kept drinking until he reached the beach and fell to a seat in the sand. The thought of his daughter came to him but he pushed it away. Somehow the lapping waves, screeching gulls, and chatter of nightlife added up to silence. When the bottle was kicked he stood and stumbled to the edge of the shore, where the boundary between land and sea tugs back and forth. The tide was going out, stretching the beach and revealing porcelain-white discarded shells. He removed his shirt and shorts, untied his shoes, placed them in a neat pile. His right foot slid into the warm salt water followed by the left. He continued like this, one foot in front of the other, until the water was up to his waist, past the point where the gentle crests were crashing. In one motion he pushed off the earth and fell backwards, caught by the buoyancy of the ocean. His arms spread wide in a cross to spread out his weight.

As he laid there, his head full of stars, he lost track of time. There was nothing to gauge it by. Nothing to even tell him where he was besides the position of constellations. The Big Dipper, he recognized that one. But for all he knew the current could have taken him out to sea, or maybe he was still in that little gully he laid back in. It didn't matter. He closed his eyes, settled into the darkness. Any minute now he might open them, stand up, make his way back to shore, figure out what to do next. No matter how bad it got, the worst was always the fear of what would happen next. At that moment, though, there was no fear. There wasn't anything. Even his relentless thoughts were quiet. And whatever happened, whether this was the end or the beginning, whether he'd sink or stand, the weight was lifted as he floated in that dark void.

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