

A Whiter Shade of Pale
by Stephen Jones

It was cool there under the bridge, with the cars and trucks careening by on the interstate like leaves in a fast moving stream. He had woke up just in time to see the sun setting red across the desert. Leaning up off the jacket he was using as a pillow, he sat there and soaked it in until there was no more left. As the last warming rays were slowly being forgotten by the horizon, he turned his back and began another night.

He carried an old green army bag that held all his belongings. His clothes were worn but not quite ragged, and his longish hair had that windblown look that all drifter's hair eventually gets. He could tell it was going to be a cool night here in the desert, but he liked it that way now. Had gotten used to it. His first year on the road he had hitched primarily in the day, and developed a strong disliking to walking in the hot sun. "Anyway," he had once said to a truckstop waitress over free coffee during her break, "the rides at night are usually a lot longer. Them people get on that blacktop to roll all night y'know, they're not just hopping from town to town, and if you can hook up with a trucker, then you got it made, so long as you don't mind listening to him talk all night ..."

Another car flies by without stopping, the thirty-seventh since the night began, and as he turns back around, he notices something in the sky. Looking up, they're everywhere; Shooting stars, and for a moment he almost remembers another mid-August night like this, with the meteor shower, and...But he forces his mind to focus itself elsewhere, away from the sky and the images associated with it tonight.

He forces his mind to focus on that movement in the road up ahead. A dog, sniffing the bones of some roadkill that the buzzards have picked clean during the day. He whistles, and it raises its ears, looking at him curiously the way dogs do, like it's trying to remember its role in this situation. He whistles again and it shyly approaches, belly to the ground and pawing in submission. Soon it

becomes comfortable with him, and they walk down the road together for an hour or so, the dog thoroughly inspecting everything as they go.

As the moon began its slow ascent, the man's mind latches onto a few words from long ago, a girl's rough voice telling him not to mess with these dogs on the road, you never know what they got. Liking the sound of the voice and the feelings associated with it, he tries for the hundredth time to recall her face in his mind, but still his memory only gives him the picture of a girl in white, laughing in the morning light. He lets the picture remain a while before he once again searches for something to occupy his eyes.

The dog is well ahead of him now, he can see it in the high beams of the car still far behind to the west. It seems to have found something just left of the white stripe that is keeping its attention. As he walks by he says something to the dog about a "good time" and walks on, almost whistling for it to follow, not even thinking that the dog might not have the sense to get out of the way.

Fifty yards up the road he hears the tires screech, the slap of a low bumper, then the dog yelling, yelling, hurting. He keeps on walking, carefully averting his eyes as the car passes him. The yelling eventually fades from his hearing, but it echoes on in his mind. For the next few minutes his mind will once again go through all the arguments, the rationalizations. But it's unnecessary in the end. He feels he's left all of that far behind.

An hour passes, and it takes a conscious effort for him to keep his eyes on the road.

As he goes under another bridge, he hears a car passing above him, and halts for a second until it's gone over. He hears the bottle crash on the interstate and his eyes locate it instinctively, before the pieces have even settled. He shudders, knowing full well what a 70 mph bottle can do to a person. The before and the after.

As he steps off the slanting concrete of the bridge, his boot heel comes apart and, caught in someone's headlights for a fraction of a second, he collapses in the ditch like a scarecrow. As he gets back on his feet and tries to dust the dirt from his faded denim jacket, a set of worn out brake shoes moan to the night and pretty

soon there's a pair of tail lights waiting for him about a hundred yards up the road.

He shakes his head. Some things he will never understand.

As he picks up his bag, he thinks how much he hates this, the scene where he has to run up to the car like it's his first ride ever. So demeaning. But he's played the game long enough by now that he knows better than to do otherwise, so he runs up to the deep blue Buick Electra and climbs in, throwing his bag in the back seat.

From the driver's seat a beer soaked voice offers "We can stick that in the trunk, if you'd like?"

"Nah, it'll ride," he says for the hundreth time.

In a practiced glance he absorbs the interior; vinyl seats with mathching t-shirts stretched across the back, dash cracked from the heat, a tie thrown on the rearview mirror, crushed Coors cans underfoot, old style speedo, small ice chest between him and the driver. "So now, where can I take ya'?" (Odd, he thought, all he had ever heard before was; "Where ya' going?")

Without looking over, he answers slowly, "Ahh,...just down the road a piece..." like a hundred times before. It never gets worn out.

"Alrighty, I can sure help ya' there. That's where I'm going too," the ride said, laughing at himself as he slowly picks up speed. "Oh, by the way, I'm Randy, and you're..."

He breaks away from his reflection in the dark glass long enough to look over, smile, and after a pause that *almost* gets out of hand, say, "Randy."

"Really? Well I'll be damned. Here I am, in the middle of nowhere, and who do I pick up but someone with my name-"

"-who says its your name?" he counters, still looking at the 'Other' Randy, who is now looking a little uncomfortable.

"Well, I..uh I didn't-" he stammers.

"Nah, don't worry about it. My real name's Dusty," he lies convincingly.

"Well that's a good thing, I don't know how we could of got any talking done, with me saying 'Hey Randy,' then you not knowing if I was talking to you or me, then me getting confused and thinking I really am talking to myself, then pretty soon-"

"I get what you mean, buddy," 'Dusty' interjects, now laughing hollowly along with his ride, who he was studying with the same eye that had absorbed the car's interior. What he saw was a man about his age, twenty-eight or so, clean cut, wearing denim clothes that had that look about them like they were only worn on the week-ends. Something about the way he wore his cap too, kind of like he had unconsciously bent it to look like someone else, Dusty picked up on. It's the way little brothers wear their hats.

He looks away.

"You wanna take your jacket off? I can roll up the window if it's too cold..." Randy asks, finally settling on an inconstant 75mph.

"No thanks, I've gotten kinda attached to it, y'know."

"No probleemo. Every man to himself, that's what I say. Ya thirsty? I got some good ol' Rocky Mountain Kool-Aid iced down here..."

"You bet," Dusty says, laughing to himself that this was sure looking like one ride to write home about, if he could only remember where to mail the letter.

Twenty miles and two beers later, Dusty had figured out that Randy was one of those people who gets somewhere by following the signposts on the side of the road. Unlike a trucker, he didn't see the big picture. There was no map on his head for him to look at, no little red dot saying YOU ARE HERE, no highlighted route for him to follow. For him the road was all just instances, spaces between signs giving directions. "Not that that's necessarily bad," Dusty idly thought, "so long as he keeps the car on the road."

As Randy deposited yet another can in the ditch for someone to find, he began in on the idle chatter Dusty was well accustomed to. He didn't so much listen to the words as he did to the rhythm, placing his 'uh-huhs' and 'yeahs' in the spaces where the conversation paused. This went on long enough for Dusty to finish his third beer.

From the driver's seat, Randy droned on with a story Dusty hadn't bothered to listen to the first of, slurring a little now from the alcohol; "Yep, I went to the ocean before. Thought it could give

me what I needed. And you know what happened? You want to know what I found?"

"What?"

"A big ol' seagull, all tangled up in some old fishing line, dead as a doornail I tell ya'. The jig was hooked in his eye, but it looked to me like he died from no food. Can you imagine that? Thrashing around on the edge of the water, trying to get free from something you can't understand, dying like that, alone? Man, this whole place is going to hell, but what can I do? Nothing, I tell ya'. Nothing. Hey, you still with me Dusty?"

"Yeah."

"What do you think? You ever been to the coast?"

He looked away and tried to sound earnest when he said "No-," but his mind was already cascading backwards, involuntarily calling up memories he didn't want.

Five years past.

Dusty, who was still Randy then and just through with college, had walked down the coast from his parent's beach house about three miles, going nowhere particular. The house was a new acquisition for his father, a payment for law services very well rendered, and Dusty was just kind of getting the lay of things here his first week.

He saw the cliff from a ways off, tall, white, and thought he'd like to see what the view was like from up there. Walking along the beach he counted five "CAUTION: DANGEROUS UNDERTOW" signs. He didn't like to swim anyway, he thought, so who cares? He circled back around the cliff and climbed up the gentle slope until the rocky edge of the cliff was at his feet.

He disenchantedly thought that it was really rather anti-climactic. All he could see was water, everywhere water. He stood there until the night began to descend and the chilled wind started to blow off the ocean. The tequila sunrise shirt he was wearing offered little if any protection. Reaching into his pocket he found he had his Zippo and half a joint with him, so he looked around for some driftwood, thinking he'd warm up, smoke the rest of it, then walk back home. His search led him back down to the beach, where he

gathered up some wood that he thought would suffice to warm his chilled bones.

The fire now built and much more comfortable than he expected, he laid back to enjoy the meteor shower a little more than most and blow smoke at the heavens, soon to fall asleep. The fire eventually died down, and the moon stealthily replaced the darkness with her cold light. He slept well.

What woke him was the car. Then the girl laughing. Rolling over he saw a man in a tux and a woman in a white dress get out of an overly decorated car about forty yards downhill. The girl was someone Dusty remembered well from high school, one of the girls he could never date. And now she was here. His mind ran through all the possibilities, all the chances he had missed, everything. He had never even knew her. It was all so odd, he thought, the whole thing.

The man was a stranger.

The two never saw him, but headed straight for the beach. As they passed by he heard her say "-worry, we've got time, the plane doesn't leave 'til t-" and then they were gone, running down to the beach, losing clothes with every step.

By the time they got to the water's edge, he was down to his boxers and one shoe, and she just had on her bra and panties. As they entered these disappeared also. They thought they were alone, and for all intents and purposes, they were.

Then, suddenly, as if being ripped from a dream, Dusty remembered the signs. He got up and ran over too close to the edge, almost falling over, planning to yell for them to come back, it was dangerous out there. The water.....

But he never did.

Instead he just stood there; an uninvolved but morbidly curious observer.

He watched as the undertow mercilessly grabbed the bride, pulling her under without a noise, like she never was. The groom, thinking she was playing, dived under to find her, then resurfaced some ways off, beginning to notice that something was terribly wrong. In a moment Dusty saw his mouth open in a pleading yell, but up where he was he heard only a faint call before the undertow grabbed the man

and sucked him under. They had forgotten to even turn their radio off, and it was playing some soft almost familiar song, seemingly out of place yet almost necessary for what just happened. From his vantage point, Dusty could see their trail of clothes leading towards the water's edge, could see their crumbling footprints already falling in on themselves. They were gone.

He turned back to his fire then, and relit the last CAUTION sign that hadn't managed to burn all the way down last night while he slept dreamlessly. Although he drew himself close to the fire, it didn't warm him.

Now.

"-I've never been. Saw it once from the highway, but it was far off. Looked like it wasn't even real."

"Hmm. It's probably for the best, it might have just depressed you like it did me," Randy followed.

"Yeah," and Dusty *just almost* said "I'd hate to be like you," but decided against it at the last moment.

"Ya' ready for another brew?"

"Sure," Dusty replied, although he could already feel the first three more than he liked.

After a longish pause in which Dusty contemplated a fourth beer, Randy picked up the already tangled thread of the conversation. "Me, I own a wholesale parts store. Well, really I manage it, but I tell the ladies it's mine, y'know how it goes-" then suddenly noticing something "-Hey, what's with that scar on your cheek, man, that's a real doozy, I mean, it's none of my business I know, and not that it's *that* bad or anything, I mean..."

As he talked himself further into a hole, Dusty silently weighed the options; he could tell the truth, lie, talk around it, or simply refuse to answer. Arbitrarily choosing the first option, he offered only two words; "Feild Ticket."

"Huh? Whassa feild ticket?"

He smiled dryly and replied, "It's what the cops give to guys like me, guys that they don't think are worth taking to jail. They simply take us out to some deserted feild and-" he motioned to his

scar "-leave you there afterwords."

Randy almost dropped his beer in his lap, he was so taken back that Dusty could say all this with the same monotone unattached voice, like it had all happened to someone else. "But why don't you tell somebody-"

"-like they'd believe me? Don't think so buddy. No thanks."

After that they were silent for a while, Randy nursing his beer solemnly, somewhere in there handing his passenger another without asking. Dusty could tell his ride was getting sleepy now.

"Hey, if you want, I could drive for a while, if you don't mind?"

Randy looked over calmly, doing some option weighing himself. "Sure, when we stop up here in Lamaar to get gas we can switch places, I mean, if you still want to ride and all."

The sign said twenty miles to Lamaar, Dusty noticed, and Randy was switching through the FM, trying to pick something up with not much luck. For a few seconds a song came through the static though, a reminiscing kind of southern voice;

*-----a light fandango
 turned cartwheels 'cross the floor
 I was feeling kinda seasick
 the crowd called out for more
 The room was humming harder
 as the ceiling flew away
 When we called out for another drink
 the waiter brought a tray
 And so we wi-i-i-----
 as t-- miller tol- his tal-
 That ou-----*

"Who is that?" Dusty asked off-handedly as the station faded away. "It's nice. I remember it from somewhere, it seems."

"Hmm. I don't rightly know. Sounds like some of that freeze-dried-hippie music though," Randy responded as he flipped through the sea of static, eventually resorting back to the AM. "So, you got a

Mrs. Dusty back there somewhere?"

"Nah," Dusty half lied, "you?"

"Not anymore," Randy laughed, trying to catch Dusty's eye.

Indifferent to this, Dusty slowly began, "I did have a girl for a while. Bobby. She called me Bobby too. We considered ourselves the McGees. It was kind of our own little joke-" Dusty could see Randy wasn't familiar with Ms. Joplin, so he disregarded it and went on "-Yeah, we were the thing for a while, She could get us a ride morning, noon, or night, in any kind of weather. Taught me all I know about living on the road," he added, pausing reflectively, "I don't guess I loved her or anything," (he caught Randy's look then, a look that caused his knuckles to whiten around the beer can, a look that asked "How can you love a girl in the ditch, a hitcher girl; Love only happens in cities and books, dontchya know, not out here on the road.") "We just kind of fell into each other's empty spots, the way it happens. It doesn't matter anyways," he said looking far away out the side window and only seeing a girl in white, "she's not around anymore." -For a second his mind freezes on an image of long hair matted with blood and brown glass, tail lights receding into the night, then it pans to the steady ocean, deep and blue, while his mind plays back a dog yelling in pain. He mutters "I could've helped..." under his breath and then it's gone, all gone, and Lamaar is surrounding them.

At the station Randy asks Dusty to fill it up, "please," while he navigates in to pay and get another case, having forgotten that it's already past twelve. Dusty puts the nozzle in and sits back down in the passenger seat, knowing it will take a while for this old thirty-gallon tank to get full. After a bit he reluctantly looks back at the store to see if it's all clear, then steps over and opens the glove box quickly, like he's done a hundred times before. Papers. Papers. Insurance. Straw. Birthday card? Ketchup. Gun. He takes the gun and rolls the cylinder, seeing that's it's loaded. Making sure the safety is on, he slips it into the left pocket of his jacket then goes out to finish the gas. As the tank nears full, an intentionally dislocated part of his mind wants him to put the gun back, but he doesn't, even though he's got two more in his bag that he's lifted

over the past year, right after his last feild ticket.

At first he didn't like lifting stuff, but he got used to it before too long. Bobby taught him. She told him one night; "We gotta eat, y'know, and my paycheck hasn't quite caught up with me yet, I don't know about you," raising her left eyebrow and smiling a sly smile, "It's not like they can't spare it, or anything. What's a few bucks to them either way? Nothing. And we gotta eat, ain't no escaping that no how no way..." So he began lifting stuff every ride, unless his ride was a trucker. He knew full well that most of them kept a tirebeater or a short little shotgun by the seat for snakes or what-not, and he wasn't getting involved in that if he could help it. What-not was a very general category.

Dusty was sitting in the driver's seat when Randy returned empty-handed, looking sad. He muttered something about "dumb laws" as he got in the passenger door. "Clerk said there's a truckstop just the other side of town. You hungry?"

"You bet." Dusty answered, thinking to himself that this was definitely a once in a lifetime ride.

The diner was empty, except for two rigs in the parking lot, running with the doors locked, truckers catching a quick hour in the bunk. As they walked in, Dusty felt he could hear Bob Seger in the background as he shook off the cold once more, feeling no eyes at all on him. He thought he recognized the waitress from somewhere, but didn't say anything as she took their orders; two double cheeseburgers, fries and onion rings. Before she turned to walk away she told them, in her acquired diner drawl, "the Tums are on the house fellas."

In the meanwhile Randy got up and made his way to the jukebox with a handful of quarters, asking if there was "anything particular" Dusty might like to hear.

"Umm..." thinking..., "Yeah, Travelling Man...or Uneasy Rider, if they got it." They had them both, but Randy hit some button wrong so it played Uneasy Rider nine times in a row, all through their meal. When they left, the cook was none too sad to see them go, even let them take their plastic coffee mugs with them.

As they settled into their places, the diner disappearing in the

rearview mirror, Randy leaned his seat way back and set his coffee on the dash. He told Dusty to just keep following the Grand Canyon signs and he couldn't go wrong. They hadn't gone ten miles before Dusty had to turn the country music up to drown out the snoring.

The big old car was sure smooth, Dusty thought, the kind of smooth a guy could really get used to, up to the point that he was so comfortable behind the wheel that he became dangerous.

Two hours went by.

As he leaned up to change the station from the Spanish one it was now picking up, he noticed Randy's wallet had edged itself out of his back pocket and partially into the empty space between them where the cooler had been. At first he ignored it, but Bobby kept talking to him and eventually he slipped his hand over and lifted the small item from its place on the seat. Keeping one eye on the road, he opened the wallet, listening for the slightest sound of awareness in Randy. In the money part was the change from the twenty Randy had paid for their meal with. But Dusty knew that there would be twenties hidden elsewhere, guys like Randy always did that. They had to be prepared. He found them in the picture part of the wallet, five twenties right behind the only picture Randy had; a cut-out piece of an unmailed post-card showing the Grand Canyon. Dusty slipped one of the twenties back in place, knowing that to the unsuspecting eye it would look like they were all there.

He quietly placed the wallet back just as he had found it, and then slipped the cash down into his pocket. Another three hours slipped by. Finally giving up on finding a station in the desert, he turned the radio off, causing the speakers to emit a loud "KLIK" right as they gave up. "Old cars," he mumbled, then noticed that the noise had woke Randy up.

Sitting up and rubbing his eyes, he asked in a cloudy voice, "How long was I out?"

"About five hours," Dusty lied for no reason., adding, suddenly talkative, "Y'know, back during the civil war they used to tie cannonballs to the backs of some soldiers at night, to keep them from sleeping on their back and snoring."

Laughing sleepily, Randy retorted "Go to hell. All of ya'. Just

don't spill my coffee on the way down, if you don't mind."

Reaching up for his coffee mug, he added "Yessiree, ain't nothin' in the world better than a cold cup of truckstop coffee at four in the morning."

As he took his first slurp, Dusty, forgetting for a moment that he was driving, veered over and tagged a couple of the No-Sleep-Stay-Awake bumps on the side of the road nearest the right-hand ditch. Randy splashed coffee all over his lap.

"Damn. And no napkins either," he muttered, careful not to say anything to insinuate it was Dusty's fault. "But I gotta have a straw somewhere in here, I bet..." he mumbled while trying to open the glove box with his left hand.

Dusty's face didn't change at all as he opened the glove box, but his knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. Randy was all clattering around in there blindly, spilling papers out everywhere.

Then, almost imperceptible to all but the guilty, his arm stopped and his head cocked a little to one side, as if something was wrong, but soon his hand emerged victorious with the twenty-gauge McDonald's straw.

"There, that oughtta fix it," he mumbled in a way that he meant for Dusty to hear, "now it'll stay in there." Then, for the first time, Randy adjusted his position to where he was looking almost right at the driver.

Dusty suddenly felt like it had become a little too crowded in the car for him, but he never faltered a bit, asking nonchalantly, "You really like it cold that way?"

"Yeah, I picked it up from back when I used to work security for this big parking garage. Picked up a lot of things there."

"Yeah, like what?" Dusty asked, uncharacteristically curious.

"Like how to break into people's cars, " he baited, trying to catch Dusty's eye the same way he had earlier when trying to find some common ground about women, "it's really pretty easy once you learn how to take your time."

Time. Dusty felt like time was all he had as this nowhere conversation was being tossed back carefully from one side to the other. "Ever get caught?"

"Caught? Huh? Ohhh," laughing under his breath, "No, I mean people would forget their keys so I'd have to help them in their cars. Oh man, no, I'd never have the nerve to steal something. I'd be too nervous of getting caught and all. Wouldn't you?"

"Oh. Yeah. I don't know if I could do it either..." Dusty said, wondering if he had just been netted. The silence that followed the next ten minutes gave him too much time to think about it.

He was just about to tell Randy this was where he gets off when he saw the dog caught in the headlights. He wondered if that was how he looked to Randy earlier, all scrawny and lanky and windblown and hopeless. He swerved sharply to miss it, but the dog began to go the same way. It was right in his path, and it was way too late to start stopping now. Randy grabbed the dash tightly, locking his elbows as Dusty chose the ditch and fought to keep control of the blue mass of inertia he was in command of.

The car somehow kept its feet and came to a stop enveloped in a cloud of dust and thrown up grass, drifting down together softly like a sleety rain. Randy's coffee was all over him. There was a moment of awkward silence, then they both heard the tires screech on the blacktop as the car behind them tried to dodge too, but chose the road over the ditch, thus compromising the dog.

Dusty was out of the car and running before the dog even began to yell in pain, with a voice that harmonized all too well with the echo in his head. He was there with it as it ran around in circles, its ass-end stuck to the interstate. It bit his arm as he drew near it, trying to hug it like a seven year old girl will her doll. He seemed not to feel the teeth at all.

From the ditch where he was watching, Randy could see Dusty, crouched in the road holding the broken dog, enshrined in the pale low beams of the various cars that had stopped to witness this. The grass was still falling with the dust, and it gave the picture an ethereal look. Randy felt he was looking at an old photograph album of his grandparents when they were kids, that's the kind of quality the night-silence and the headlights and the settling grass lent this scene. One of the people sitting in the cars wouldn't even tell his wife about this in the morning over his cranberry juice, because he

wasn't really sure it happened, right outside his windshield. The night plays tricks, he knew.

Randy saw Dusty's shoulders hunch up a couple of times, and he couldn't hear but figured that Dusty was hurting pretty good for some reason. He noticed as Dusty's left hand slipped into his jacket pocket and caught the momentary flash of headlights on a blued barrel. He knew. Seconds later he simultaneously heard the shot and saw Dusty's elbow kick back just a little bit. A few of the people had stepped out of their cars by now, but no one was talking, as if by agreement.

The cop pushed Randy aside as he made his way through the small group. His nightstick was out and he had a steely resolve in his eyes. A tan girl that Dusty had noticed as if she was out of place thought the cop looked like what she always imagined a gunfighter would; cold and hard. Dusty saw him coming and could still feel the tingling spot in his palm where the gun had kicked him, the warm blood splattered all over his right arm. He had five bullets left.

Randy could feel what was about to happen, but he was frozen in place. It was all happening too fast, like a barrel rolling out of control down a steep hill. Then, unexpectedly, from the corner of his eye, he saw a trucker step out in front of the cop, tire-beater in hand. Randy stepped in beside him, along with the tan girl. Their shadows stretched out into the ditch, and maybe further, blending in with the night.

"We don't want any trouble here officer, know what I mean?" the tan girl said in an almost familiar voice, very sure of herself. Randy and the trucker nodded their eyes in agreement.

Dusty began to stand up behind the three, gun in hand.

The highway patrolman put his hand to the butt of his service revolver, motioning them to get out of the way or become part of the problem.

They stood fast, and the moment lasted.

Together they heard the first solid "clunk," followed by a rattle but didn't see what it was, everyone so afraid to look away.

By the time the second "clunk" got there, they had all looked down to see the bullet roll to a stop against the officer's boot. Dusty was tossing the shells into the middle of the group, one by one.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Then the gun.

They turned to look at him but his head was down, windblown hair covering his eyes. As the cop cuffed him, Randy got one last glimpse of Dusty's tear-streaked face, then he was gone. Out of his life.

The small crowd dispersed as Dusty, who had been Randy, was being frisked and cuffed, without a fight. Only his most recent ride noticed that the cop had made no contact on the radio, no license check, had given no formal reason *why* he was taking Dusty away. When Randy asked, he mumbled something about concealed weapons and firing a gun within one hundred yards of the road, recited something about hitchhiking being illegal in this state.

As he was being led to the black and white car, Dusty's eyes loitered on the tan girl for a moment, and he almost smiled, because something about her had allowed him to recall Bobby's face suddenly, instead of the girl in white's. He wanted to thank her somehow, but they were already going different directions.

The last thing Dusty heard as the door was being firmly closed was Randy, pleading with the cop, saying it was *his* gun, he had asked Dusty to shoot the dog. He *wasn't* a vagrant, he was his *brother for God's sake*...

...he was anything that would get him off the hook.

But it was too late, the barrel had been rolling for too long to stop it now.

As the night settled back over all, the leaves began careening on by as always, as if they had somewhere so important to go that they could just ignore the water they were in.

Later in the day, on the way home, Randy would remember the old green bag in back, but would never look inside, always keeping it with him. Just in case.

Dusty was looking beyond his reflection in the bulletproof glass now, out at the dawn that was beginning to break, red in the dry desert sky. The shooting stars he had been calmly watching during the ride were fading away slowly, desperately trying to hold onto the night, it seemed. He smiled as he thought of this, and smiled remembering the first time he had seen these quiet travellers, miles and miles ago. He barely even felt as the car crossed the cattleguard and softly stepped onto the dirt road. It was all the same to him.

As the they began to slow into a little nameless ravine in nobody's field, Dusty began to hear something from deep in the back of his mind; a song in the background, like somebody had left a radio on and the battery was getting low. It was a soft reminiscing kind of voice that was coming through, and the words filled the empty spaces in his heart. Some long forgotten part of himself sang along;

*She said there is no reason
and the truth is plain to see
But I wander through my playing cards
would not let her be
One of sixteen Vestal Virgins
who are leaving for the coast
And although my eyes were open
they might just as well been closed
And so we wi-i-i-nnnnnnnd
as the miller told his tale
Then our faces burst just ghostly
turned a whiter, shade of pale.*