

1. SELLING OUT MYSELF

My wife has been a little sick of late. She has complained about headaches and swollen glands. I am sympathetic. But Ariel always seems so independent. She works in a bio lab. Each morning she is usually up and dressed before me.

Today I don't have to go in until the afternoon. I am working at home. I have problems with the spreadsheets for work.

"I'll get it taken care of."

Around 10 the power goes out. My stuff is automatically backed up on the computer. I am still worried about losing something.

I could go to work and use the computers there. I keep expecting the power to come back on. I don't even open the blinds. I remain down here in semi-darkness

I am always extra careful. I make back ups of all my work. I am constantly saving things. But one never knows. There was no real warning about the power failure. I just heard a crackling noise and the power went dead. I refuse to leave until I can check on things. It could be the whole morning.

I decide to take advantage of the situation. I take a short nap. Words echo from my dream: "You made a joke about blood on the candlesticks. What did you mean by that?"

I hear a noise. Everything is coming on. I jump.

I turn my computer back on. I go to my program. I am prompted to save a file that was saved as a backup.

"Would you like to save it with a new name?"

"G-A-R-B-A-G-E," I type in. I save all the most recent files on a CD disk. Then I am ready to go to work. It is almost noon.

I drive my car to the Dunwoody transit station. I am catching the train to work in downtown Atlanta. A man approaches me.

"What are you doing hanging around my wife?"

I don't recognize him. I don't have the vaguest about what he is talking about.

He keeps on talking, "You're sleeping with her, aren't you?"

I'm hardly sleeping with Ariel

The train is taking a while to get to the station. I go over to look at the headlines on the newspaper. Someone has scrawled a weird insignia on the news box.

"What does that mean?"

Another passenger is pointing to the graffiti.

"I don't know." I stare at it for a while. It seems important. I work to memorize the design. While on the train, I make a sketch of the symbol on the front of a file folder.

"What is that?"

Bill is a fellow sales rep. He points at the markings on my folder.

"You haven't gone and joined a gang."

I laugh.

I am in a motel in Salt Lake City. My wake up call is for 7:30. I shower and dress. They have a note about Danish down in the lobby. They have fresh coffee. There are flattened honey buns in cellophane. I'm hungry. I eat three small packages.

My appointment is supposed to be there at 9AM. I wait until 11. I have to be in Phoenix later on. I pack up my stuff and check out. It looks like an eleven or twelve hour drive. I really

don't want to be driving at night. Some of the drive is treacherous. But I have an appointment tomorrow.

It is 2 in the morning when I finally pull in. It has been a long drive. My air conditioning has not been working. When I could, I drove close to 80 mph. I didn't see any cops. My hotel is near the airport. My appointment is supposed to come in by plane. He is staying at another hotel. There is a note for me when I arrive. He will see me at 10 in the restaurant. I make it down to the restaurant at 10:15. He is unable to wait. He leaves a note for me.

"Another time!"

He has to catch a plane out of Phoenix for Dallas. I can't very well follow him. I have someone else to see tomorrow. I am driving to LA. It should take six or seven hours. I leave after my breakfast.

My client refuses to see me in LA. He wants them to send my supervisor. I am going to Sacramento the next day. I have to pick up a package and then take it to Reno.

I am in a nice hotel in Sacramento. It is an old place. At one time it was *the* hotel of Sacramento. I order breakfast in the room. I put it on the bill. Then I pack up and start to drive to Reno.

I stop at an Albertson's. I go to the deli counter where they make me two sliced ham sandwiches with cheese. I get a soda to drink on the way.

2 hours 10 minutes

I stay at the Lucky Star Motel in Reno. The cable doesn't work well. The Showtime feed is full of static. I can see the outline of two women on a bed. I turn off the TV and go to bed.

I meet someone at the Lucky 7 gift shop. I buy a souvenir there. I am supposed to deliver it to the Lucky Lady Hotel in north Vegas. That is eight hours away. I make it in to my hotel at 10 PM. Near Vegas, there has been some traffic on US 95.

I have two days before I have to be to another destination. I will welcome the rest. I sleep through my appointment. I leave the souvenir at the desk.

"We normally don't do this sort of thing. But we will make an exception for you." The girl gives me a big smile. When I go back to the lobby, she hardly notices me.

I need to drive back to Phoenix and leave me my car there. I am catching a flight to Dallas. My missed appointment is going to meet me at my hotel there.

I get sick as a dog in Dallas. Food poisoning. I think it is the sandwich that I ate on the plane. Although I did have some pizza in Dallas. It could have been that. I can't leave my room. The air-conditioning actually makes me feel better. I press the remote for a movie. I'll feel much better in the morning.

They want me to wait here for a week. I can't think of the ungodly reason that they would want that. But I do what they tell them. I am dressed. I am sitting on the freshly made bedspread. There is a package of peanuts that I got on the plane. I eat them. This is all that I have eaten today. They taste good. It is getting boring in Dallas. I'm not sure what I can do.

I go the lobby and look at the headlines of the newspapers. I ignore *USA Today*. The local paper describes a pileup on the interstate. No one is hurt. A semi loses its load. Traffic is backed up for hours. I imagine waiting and wondering when things will clear up.

I go back to the room.

I realize that I have had my phone off. I call Ariel. She doesn't pick up. I leave a

message. I call work.

“All that you really can do is to wait.”

I do what they tell me. Then I catch a flight for Denver. I get a car at the airport. I head for my hotel.

Ray is a day trader. I pick him up in Denver. He needs a ride to Omaha. He has missed his flight that morning. I hear him talking at the main desk of the hotel.

“I’m going to Des Moines. You can ride with me.”

He goes from bouts of introspective silence to moments that he doesn’t want to shut up. Every so often he’ll pull out his cell phone as if he’s about to make a big deal. Then he’ll complain about his phone reception and won’t even bother at all. I really wonder how he makes any money.

“I got burned,” he tells me. I feel that we are on the ride of a lifetime.

“I wanted to buy Golden Squire at when it was selling at 264. I couldn’t make the margin call. Then it rose to 269. I wasn’t sure if it was going to rise much above 271. When it hit 274. I was edgy. It went all the way up to 299 before it dropped back to 267.” I am taking it all in.

“You could have made some money if you had bought it when it was low.”

“I know that now. I hate myself for stuff like that.”

“What is Golden Squire?”

“They do security. Government work.”

“Doesn’t everyone these days? Even our company.”

His glasses are slipping off his head. He tells me that he has a wife and kids. That they tolerate his random life style. At one point, he has me stop as he talks to his boy on the phone.

“If I had more money, I’d send it to you. I’ll be home as soon as I can make it.”

I wonder if he is on the road because he is having problems with his wife. But his son seems even more assertive than his mother. There has to be more going on than this. For the moment, I imagine him driving. It seems as if he could barely focus on the road.

“Why are you on the road so much?”

“It’s how I figure out the pulse of America. It’s what makes me such a good buyer.”

I wonder if it’s the other way around. That the only reason that he works in this sketchy business is to keep him on the road. What kind of pulse is he feeling? That of other marginal types like him. If that was the pulse than every sign would say sell. But he hangs in there waiting for that one big stock to ride.

I remain skeptical. He only makes the occasional deal. I wonder if he even has the means to stay in this market. He’s like the former gambler who remains current by glancing at the ponies’ spread in the sports pages. All his bets are imaginary. That’s why he loses next to nothing. On the other hand, no one can live on it.

“Why are you going to Omaha?”

For a moment I think that this is where his family is. Omaha would make more sense if he was in the commodities market.

“I’ve got a tip to meet someone there. That’s how I work. People tell me things face to face. Then I make the deals. It keeps me fresh.”

I picture a hog farm. He’s in the back of some shed getting the real deal. I can even smell the shit. It’s too potent to contemplate. He is living the market as something actual. Not

simply projections in the *Wall Street Journal*. He is aware even before the paper hits the stands.

His life sounds appealing. The results are immediate. Non one in an office considering if the time is right. I aspire after something like that. I still am not getting a clear enough picture of Mr. Ray

What really makes him tick? What makes him scream with passion.

“Honey, I’m close to Omaha. We’re already in Nebraska.”

We’re actually quite a ways away. About two hours out of Grand Island. He won’t make any major deals today. I suspect not.

We need to stop for gas on I-80. I can hear Ray talking to a broker as I come back to the car.

“Ray, they’ve got burgers in there.”

“I am hungry. Can I get you something?”

“No. I’ll be OK.”

His hamburger is probably the only thing that he’s eaten today. I can’t tell whether it’s due to his lack of organization or to his poverty.

“A man’s only as good as his last score.”

Whatever that means. A big sky engulfs us. We fade into expanse.

Ray keeps talking, “I guess if I was more of a betting man, I’d be rich now.”

He also could have been cleaned out. He descends on his burger as we continue driving. He takes out his pad and makes a few notes. It gets stained with the grease and ketchup from his hands. He clumsily works to rub it off.

Maybe his strategy isn’t working. That his order is running down into chaos. Every trader lives with this uncertainty. He works to use it to his advantage. He has already embraced the catastrophe. Everything can only get better. At least he hopes that. What providence has ordained his eventual rescue.

Fortunately his moods lead him to prolonged periods of silence. I take comfort from the surrounding country. There is that same conviction about order. The pace on the interstate is fast. The weather is clear.

It must be hell living the way that he does. I feel that even his family exists as a margin. Some days they are full-bodied. They can talk to him on the phone. At other moments, they are only a promise. A bit of conversation. A fading memory. The horizon promises resolution. There will be none. We speed along.

Ray convinces that my life has a pattern. That even as he is spiraling out of control, I am closing in on a center of meaning. The promise of the cities to come. Lincoln. Omaha. I have a feeling of confidence since I am the driver. He is always a passenger. Someone is making big deals. He tries to go along for the ride.

Welcome aboard, Ray.

What can Ray offer me? He suggest a belief. A romance with the haphazard. I find this exciting. Maybe a good deal will offer him a more stable home life. A new family. For the time being he is like a black hole sucking in everything around him. The end of energy. The negative.

I need him. He offers me a warning. He is my death angel. Sell, sell, sell. The crash is near.

I will go along with him until he becomes an unwieldy stock. Then I will take the cue. I

will dump him. His wife has been merciless. His new wife will not have the chance. He will convince her to stay on the train. That is later on. He is not on a lucky streak.

I am going to have to stay in Omaha. I have no business there. I cannot make Des Moines. Not tonight. I drop Ray at a motel. I tell him that I am going to continue driving. I need to get away from the omen.

I meet a real estate agent at the hotel. I wonder what it would be like if I moved here. It is a consideration. Ariel is expecting me to come back. I have been away for a while. I have important work to get done.

I am standing on a bridge and looking down at the Des Moines River. I probably should have completed my business in Omaha.

“We considered working with Ray. He proved to be a liability.”

They wonder why I let him ride in the car for so long. He gave me new ideas. Ray was astounding in his own way.

Tomorrow, I take I-35 to Kansas City. I have two appointments in the afternoon. I also have a delivery to make from my trip to Des Moines.

“You did take care of things.”

“I have everything taken care of.”

I get a steak dinner with my second client.

“This is great beef.”

“Indeed it is.”

I am in Kansas City. I am here to make a sale. I have my briefcase next to my bed. It is full of diagrams and charts that detail why we are a proven success. For the moment, this is the remote past. Someone else’s life. I can make neither heads or tails out of any of this. I am supposed to open this case and decipher an identity for myself. Once I see it all the words will come. I don’t know why I am here. I really have little reason to be in Kansas City. It is so far from my home.

I have made the hotel my home for the time being. I can imagine never returning to my life in Atlanta.

Angel meets me in Nebraska. I have reversed my path. I am traveling along I-80. She is trying to convince me to head north to Wyoming. She wants me to drop her by the Snake River. I had originally wanted to return to Denver even though my client is no longer in the city,

She crouches in the corner of her seat. She bites her nails. She is on the run. She hitches rides. It can get pretty dangerous on the road.

She has on a purple shirt that she has rolled up to expose her midriff. Her belly button is pierced. She also has piercings in her mouth and nose.

“Don’t you feel frightened hitch-hiking?”

“I usually don’t just stand by the side of the road. I’ll befriend guys and ask them for a ride. Or I’ll use ride boards at a college.”

I like her exuberance. I need a pick up after Ray’s downers.

“Do you mind if I smoke.?”

“I’m allergic to smoke.”

I agree to a cigarette break every three hours.

“It’s a good idea for you to stop too. Road fatigue is one of the major cause of accidents.”

We have just crossed into Wyoming. She looks me in the face.

“I’ve seen God.”

“How have you seen God?”

“Like a person. Like you sitting before me right now.”

“What is he like?”

“A lot like you but less scary.”

I look over at her and she is smiling.

“I was teasing you about being scary. But I really have seen God.” Angel has a very charming smile.

I feel a little strange with her in the car. She has an otherworldly presence. Admittedly, I am attracted to her. But she seems rather young. I am trying to be protective. Trying to keep a safe distance. I realize how the road has been for her. Never a chance to catch her breath. Always a new situation to defend herself against.

I look over at her ankle. She is wearing a dainty little bracelet. I imagine the kisses, kisses on her tender skin.

She decides to tell me the story of why she ran away, “I had to get out. My stepfather was such a pain. He never did anything to me. He was one of these moral types. Always telling me that I was going to go to hell if I kept smoking. That my body was God’s temple. And all this shit.”

“Why didn’t you ignore him?”

“He tried to control my life. Tell me what guys I could see. He told me that I should never have sex until I was married. And then only rarely. Even then, I should ask God to forgive me.”

“Did that affect you?”

“Of course it did. I wanted to hang out with my friends. It wasn’t like I really wanted to do anything that bad. He just wanted to make me feel guilty. It lifted such a weight off me when I left home.”

“Weren’t you afraid?”

“The hell I was . Everything that I had known was something created for me by my mother. That made it worse. It’s as if she protected me all my life. And when he came along, she just surrendered me to this big bad wolf.” She makes these haunting gestures with her hands. Then she smiles at me. She wants my concern. I feel that she wants more than that.

She has other stories. I can tell that she doesn’t want to talk about them.

“My step-dad lived this perfect life. He never really stepped outside of the lines. He’d tell me how I lived in the land of opportunity. And that I was wasting mine. If that’s what I had to do to get away, then that was what I was committed to.”

“But he’s still haunting you.”

“That’s the point. He tried to get under my skin. He wanted to affect me. To get me to take out the piercings. To dress in a happier way. To change my musical tastes. I couldn’t listen to him.”

I can sense that I am in this weird place. I hear these stories of other people’s lives. I

become involved as victimizer and victim. That is part of why I need to carry on. I need to hear more.

“I’m going to have to make a decision before I get to Cheyenne. Do I turn south and go back to Denver?”

“I can’t go to Denver.”

“Why not?”

“If you could go up to Idaho.”

“Though the High Country.”

“It already getting pretty mountainous now.”

“I could drop you at Cheyenne.”

“Do you have to go to Denver?”

She gave me puppy-dog eyes.

Most of my work is already done in Denver. I need to do a follow up. But it can wait. It might be better later in the week.

“I can’t keep driving. I’m going to have to take a break at some point.”

“How long is it until we make Cheyenne?”

“I’d say about twenty minutes.”

I think that she is just beginning to trust me. I am becoming used to traveling with her. I really enjoy her company. It takes me back to another moment. A time of real hope. True curiosity.

I have no business carrying on past Cheyenne. This is a turning point for me. I hope that I will not come to regret it. I can’t turn back. I’d like to. I can’t.

“There was this guy at school. I really liked him. And I was at this party. We were all about twelve or thirteen. Some of the kids had been smoking weed. I had drunk some wine coolers. And I went into the closet with the boy I liked. His name was Derrick. He started touching me in all these crazy ways. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t feel ready. But I wanted to show him how much I liked him. We took off our clothes. Things got a little freaky in there. When I saw him at school, he ignored me. I went up to him and asked him what happened. He told me that he didn’t like hanging out with skanky whores like that.”

“He hurt me. I mean he went along with it too. After that, I didn’t want to hang out with the kids at school. I met this older guy. Al. He was about twenty two. He spent all this money on me. He taught me all these things about sex. He was really my first. He’d take me to shows. I needed to sneak out of my parents’ house. If they ever caught me, they would have killed me. I know my mom was cool with some of the things that I did. But her husband just made her go along with his strictness.”

“So I spent all my time with Al. Until my step-dad caught him one night. He actually beat him. Al was a big dude. But my step-dad went one on one with him. It was a real scene. He threatened to call the cops on him for having sex with an underage girl. I think that he was going to kill Al himself.”

“After that, I realized some things about myself. They weren’t all that pretty. I saw how easy it was to get things from guys. Older guys. I no longer hung around with kids from school. I got less and less interested in my classes. But I made my own way.”

I interrupt her, “You never actually took money for sex.”

“No, nothing like that. But guys would give me stuff. I had to realize how fine that line was. What would I have to promise so I could get something in return?”

“That’s a terrible way to think about things.”

“It’s how we all are. I even had to convince you not to go to Denver.”

“That’s not the same thing.”

“I hope not. But then I never know. Even the terrible experiences start out that same way. A guy tells me how nice he is. Some of them had kids. They were so gentle with the kids. But get a few drinks into him, and he starts throwing his weight around. It would happen like that quite a bit.”

“Do you drink?”

“When I have to. Sometimes I do more than others. That’s why I’m going to Idaho. I want to find my real father. Just get away from city living.”

“You never told me anything about that.”

“About my real reason for the trip? I never thought that it was the right time.”

Just outside of Cheyenne, we need to stop for the night. I feel a little uncomfortable about the situation. I was originally just going to give her a ride. This is a long trip. We get a room with two beds.

“I get the bed across from the TV.”

She is still watching a movie on Showtime as I fall asleep.

In the morning, she is already showered and dressed before I wake up. I have kept my eye on my wallet. She’s alone on the road. She probably doesn’t have much money. I can’t really trust her.

“Do you want to get some breakfast?”

She nods excitedly.

She eats heartily. It’s as if she hasn’t eaten in days. We go back to the room. She gets her knapsack, and we are again on the road.

The scenery is more and more majestic. Outside of Laramie, we cross the Medicine Bow River. Massive peaks face us on the south.

As we are further along, the Elk Mountain’s purple summit rises gradually from the surrounding countryside. For a while the Medicine Bow River follows the path of the interstate. Creeks flow down the mountain and connect with the river. It gives a feeling of energy to the drive. This is only the beginning.

Red Desert offers a deeper step in this journey. Rock formations project up from the desert floor. We are in a natural temple. The base is solid and sure. The columns reach up to support the sky. Our hands are raised to mimic the grasp of stone.

Angel appears as fascinated as I am. I want to stop and embrace what I see. It is becoming part of my soul.

Near Rock Springs the mountains seem to rumble along with the cloud distributions overhead. We can now touch the sky.

“I can hear it.”

“Angel, what are you talking about.”

“The voices are back.”

“I thought that was a joke.”

“Not at all.”

Her vision is more intense once we pass close to Salt Lake City. We weave around mountains until the breadth of the Lake is before. Everywhere that we look, we are surrounded by the snow-capped mountains. Even this late in the season. I reach out to touch the sky. I have been accepted.

She is half-asleep. She claims that she can see it all. But she is more tuned in to an inner eye.

This is not just her pilgrimage. It is mine.

We decide to stop a little ways out of Salt Lake City. I need to rest for the night. She is somewhat in a trance. She zones into the television and then fades for the night. I fall asleep after I shut out the light.

We start the final leg of our trip together. It is only a short trip to Twin Falls.

I decide to head to Shoshone Falls park. We have been driving straight through. We need a real break. I park the car and we walk along the path leading to the falls.

The Snake River rages through the mountains to culminate at this place. It bristles with significance. The multi-colored hills surround the roaring waters. Each cascading level of the falls drop is an affirmation of this meeting of stone and rock. The sky seems to highlight this encounter with its trailing clouds.

At one point, Angel runs ahead of me. I catch up to her at the viewing point.

“I have to go to the washroom, Angel. I’ll be back in a moment.”

I am hardly gone when I come back to find her gone. I figure that she might have gone back to the car. I travel back there. I still don’t see her. I am wit’s end. I have been taking care of her for days, and she just disappears.

I spend about three hours looking for her. I talk to the Park Ranger. I have him call the local police. I give them a complete report.

I look down from the heights of the falls to the long drop below. It may have been an accident. Someone could have pushed her. She might have met her father. Anything.

I ask the police to keep me informed. I drive on to Boise. There I am able to meet a client. Things have turned around for my business endeavors. I continue to be worried about Angel. I hear no news.

In Boise, I talk to Warren. He needs a ride to Yakima, Washington. I have to drive on to Seattle. He is a former bank employee. He has just received a compensation settlement. He is planning to retire.

“They held me hostage in a bank.”

I let him tell his story as we drive.

“Dwight was a customer of our bank. I worked as a teller. I’d always say hello to Dwight. Since I had been there so long, he assumed that I was one of the Vice Presidents of the bank. I was only a teller.”

“Somehow they really screwed Dwight on a loan. They knew rates were going up. They got him on some balloon payment. Just a royal screw up. He blamed it on the bank. Then he went in to talk to someone, and they only made matters worse. He talked Rachel. She’s VP. She just got her MBA. And she learned some method about grading potential loans based on a point system. And wanted to impress the central office. So she starts going on how this is a bad

loan in the first place, and how they need to cancel it. Now Dwight is really pissed. He had no idea who to talk to. So he decides that he's going to rob the bank. He just snaps like that. He goes home and get his gun. Somehow he gets through security."

"Then next thing he's pulling his gun on a teller. The police somehow get called. Pretty soon, he's made everyone a hostage. As good faith he decides to let everyone go except for the bank President. And he swears that I'm the bank President. I tell him that I'm just a teller. That I don't have the combination to the safe. I can't really help him. At this point, I'm his bargaining chip."

"I really feel sorry for this guy. I know he's holding a gun on me. But they really screwed with this guy. All his dreams had just gone down the tube. What do they call that? They have a name for that syndrome."

I shake my head. He keeps talking.

"They turn off the air conditioning in hopes to get him to come out sooner. It's hot as hell in that bank. Just so nasty humid. And the day keeps wearing down. There's nothing that he can do. Nowhere that he can go. But he just hangs on.

"He hangs on through most of the next day. And they have a negotiator. And his wife shows up. The whole rigamarole."

"How did you feel through it?"

"I was confused. I almost felt that they had screwed me over. I completely took his side. He was so gracious to me. We both suffered together. But the negotiations didn't help. I was the one that finally convinced him to give up."

"I felt this weird sense of relief. Glad it was over. But I felt that I was now ready to serve my sentence. I had talked him into surrendering. I had surrendered with him. Really. In every way."

"The bank owed me big. I had prevented the whole mess from getting worse. But I couldn't go back. I had to see a doctor. I had headaches. Bad dreams. The shakes."

"I talked to a lawyer. I could have sued the bank. But they worked with the insurance company to give me a settlement." He finishes his story. He is staring straight ahead of him. There is little that I can say.

"That sounds really rough."

"It was. I felt like there was a part of me that had been cut out. I was married with two kids. I couldn't explain anything. I withdrew into myself. I got a divorce. She moved to San Francisco. It was the most bizarre thing. I'll never get over it."

"Why are you going to Yakima?"

"I've got a friend from college. We're going to start an online business. Sell computers. And chess sets. Other sorts of collectibles."

"Wow!"

Wayne says little until we come to a town along the way. Then he rattles off this encyclopedic knowledge. This is what he's been doing in his spare time since the hold up. Just learning minutia about surrounding towns.

I leave him in Yakima. His friend meets him at a gas station.

In Seattle, I have a client waiting. It is an informative meeting. All we have to do is close the deal.

They tell me to wait in Seattle for a few days. I have to go home soon. Ariel still is not feeling well.

There's not much on television. The past few days have been hectic. I crash out in my clothes. When I wake up in the middle of the night, I need to take off my suit.

In the morning I receive a fax from my office

"Some things in life you can find. You can see them. Others are hidden. Good luck!"

If I am going to wait here, I'll need to find something to do. Dallas turned into a disaster. They have to do something at the home office. This is turning into a disaster.

I find a restaurant in a built up area near the docks. I have salmon and new potatoes. Then I catch a cab back to the hotel.

Ariel calls. She has to go in for tests. She has an appointment to see the doctor when I get back. I hope that she is OK.

I haven't heard anything more about Angel. She probably met up with her father. There is nothing more that I can do.

As I try to sleep, I imagine that I am being held hostage in a bank. I take the gun from the bank robber. I decide to turn the tables. I become the robber. He is now my hostage. I think that I like that way better. I am in the same situation. I am being held hostage in Seattle. It could be worse. Before I know it, it will be worse.

"It is raining outside."

I am not going outside.