

Fort Stockton Blues

It was Christmas Eve, 1971, and we were freezing and scared. The sun had dropped below the wind-scrubbed range, and with it our prospects for grabbing a ride out of Fort Stockton, Texas. Like many predicaments, this one began with what seemed like a grand idea at the time, just four days earlier.

It was UVM's winter break. I was an English major, focused on becoming a writer. I stared out the window and watched the snow plows clear North Street. Last night's fresh powder would soon be reduced to piles of packed grey soot, the dishes were piled high in the sink, and I was restless.

I reread the last page of Kerouac's, *On The Road*, caught by his, "raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast," and, "nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old."

I felt trapped. The great writers had taken risks, stepped out on the ledge. The big questions and exciting stories must be out there, beyond this bleak Vermont sky, our ice dammed roof, the heartless blasts of wind off the lake, and the pervasive holiday cheer. I had to escape.

I turned to Miriam, my best friend. She was hunched over her desk plodding through one of her arcane philosophy books. I had tried many times to convince her to become a writer. "Why do you want to spend so much time trying to understand someone else's answers to the meaning of life," I'd say, "when you could write your own version like me." She would grumble something about lax intellectual standards and turn back miserably to her text.

“Hey listen to this.” I read her the classified ad that had captured my attention: *Wanted, good driver to deliver car from Burlington to Las Vegas. Will reimburse for travel expenses.* The contact information followed.

She raised her eyebrows, squared her broad shoulders, and ran her hand through her short, blond hair. She gave me a sharp look. “Sarah, the last time you had an inspiration it cost me a hundred in fines and a lot of explaining to do.”

I ignored her reticence and appealed to her sense of adventure.

“Come on, think about it. A road trip across the heartland with all expenses paid, then we can hitchhike back across the south.” She had thumbed her way solo across country the previous summer, and had come back inspired for a while, ecstatic with freedom, until Kant, Hegel, and Spinoza drove her back to earth.

She shook her head. “I want to be in Vermont for New Year’s.”

“No problem,” I insisted. “We’ll get back in time,” thinking, I never knew her to be on time for anything.

She dug in, so I played my strongest card. “It has to be warm down there.” Miriam hated the cold. She began complaining in November and didn’t relent until the spring flowers appeared.

That did it, and after she made me promise again that we would be in Vermont for New Year’s Eve, I made the arrangements to get the car. We stuffed our packs and emptied the refrigerator. It was five days before Christmas. On the way out I grabbed my journal and the new swiss army knife my father had given me. It was a dandy- two blades, saw, tweezers, scissors, screwdriver, can opener. I was ready for anything.

We drove that Pontiac Firebird slowly out of Vermont, with its black- ice- covered roads. As we zipped into New York I sang, “Goodbye snow, Lake Champlain wind, parkas and boots! Good riddance Vermont! Desert warmth here we come!”

We took turns driving, switching every three hours or so, as we cranked out one thousand miles the first day, slept for a couple of hours at a truck stop in Indiana, pumped up on coffee and pie, and drove westward. Fields of corn stubble spread out to the horizon, visible in the dim first light. We became reflective.

“Is there anything that is not god- the sky, those pigeons, that farmhouse, this car?” Miriam asked.

I answered, “Probably not,” carefully avoiding the absolutes, in case it was a trick question.

She pounced anyway. “Exactly my point, see, if everything is god, then god cannot be defined. So why do we try to pin her down, put words in her mouth, call this holy, that unholy.”

I answered, “It’s hubris I guess.”

“The Buddhists call it greed, anger and ignorance,” Miriam said.

I wanted questions, not answers, and tried to move off the topic, as I could see she was getting revved up. We had a long way to go.

I left the highway to refuel, passing through small towns with Christmas lights and decorations draped from every house—Santa and Rudolph, snowmen, snowflakes, trees lit in windows and yards, and of course, Jesus in the manger.

“You ever feel like you’re in a foreign country?” I asked.

“We might be the only Jews in Indiana,” she replied.

We dropped down through Missouri and into Oklahoma. We had the road to ourselves in the middle of the night. As Miriam dozed, my mind raced along with the car, thoughts firing rapidly— *What was consciousness? Could anything be defined without comparing it to something else? Could life exist without death?*

I felt exhilarated, free, and far from Vermont. I saw she was awake.

“Smell that desert air,” I beamed.

“That’s petroleum you’re snorting,” she shot back, as we passed bobbing oil derricks on both sides of the road. In New Mexico we crossed the continental divide, gawking at the snowy peaks to the north. Eight hours later we pulled into Sin City after driving twenty-five hundred miles in two and a half days. We had a big breakfast for less than two dollars. While Miriam tried a few slot machines, I pulled out my journal and glanced around.

A drunk Santa hits three lemons, quarters spilling out like rain, as he whoops and hollers. To his right an older woman whispers a prayer before each pull. Next to her a gaunt man plays two machines, yanking the levers without joy, his cigarette dripping ash onto the stained carpet.

Men turn and leer at me. When Miriam stands by my side, glaring at them, they look away. I love my tough-ass friend! Did I mention she is a black belt? She says that every successful philosopher needs to not only master logical arguments, but also the quick kick to the balls. My only defensive moves are metaphors and ironic observations. Miriam has had enough of Vegas.

We drop off the car and receipts, and head out of town, a few dollars in our pockets, and our packs optimistically slung over one shoulder. Oh, sweet adventure!

I finished writing and stuffed the journal in my pack. We caught several rides, carefully checking out the occupants before getting in a car, and arrived in Flagstaff, Arizona before dark. I noticed that the air had chilled down, and I was shivering in my lightweight jacket. I glanced over at Miriam. She had her hands stuffed into a spare pair of socks and her shoulders were hunched, head bowed against the wind.

“We might as well be back in Vermont, at least we know what to expect from winter there,” she complained. Then, as the wind picked up, mocking the two outsiders standing in the deserted street, she groaned, “And I thought we left Lake Champlain behind!” It was two days until Christmas.

A truck passed and two cowboys yelled obscenities.

A family in a van drove slowly by, the kids pointing at us and laughing.

An hour passed with no traffic. It had begun to snow. My fingers and toes were numb. Miriam’s hair was coated with frost. An icicle hung from her nose.

It felt too cold for our thin sleeping bags. We counted all our cash, and decided that we couldn’t afford a hotel. We walked past a church and looked at the crèche, softly lit in the yard. There were the wise men standing outside the manger. Inside, an angel, donkey, Mary and Joseph, looked adoringly at baby Jesus in the hay.

Without a word, Miriam cut across the churchyard and ducked into the barn. She signaled me to follow, and with some misgivings I joined her.

“I don’t know about this, Miriam. We don’t exactly fit in this scene.”

“ Sure we do, although we may not qualify as particularly wise, seeing as we thought we were leaving winter behind. Besides, don't you think I kind of look like Mary?”

I closely examined the Madonna's loving gaze, and then Miriam's pugnacious countenance. “More similarities with the donkey I think.”

But she had already unrolled her sleeping bag and was nestling into the hay. The barn buffered the wind, and we slept.

We woke with the sun to water dripping through the roof boards, soaking our sleeping bags. We were stiff and sore as we stuffed our wet bags and stumbled out of the manger. Miriam's hair and clothes were matted with hay.

Two women chatting outside the church stared as apparitions emerged. We hurried by, determined to put some miles behind us. Our plan was to swing south, pick up route 10 in Texas, and barrel across the country to northern Florida before heading up the coast.

Our third pick-up, heading to Fort Stockton, Texas, is a chatty, young rodeo rider. Caleb drives 80 miles per hour and talks to us continually, about different types of horses and how the West is changing. I have my journal in my lap, jotting notes, capturing the cadence of Calebs speech.

“You know, folks ain't too used to seein' hitchhikers back home,” he says, “and two ladies gettin' in after dark, I don't know. You fixin' to get a ride back East tonight?” He

sounds doubtful. "Not much traffic heading out of town Christmas Eve, that's for sure. And steer clear of the Franklin place."

"The Franklin place," Miriam injects sleepily, just to make sure he knows she is awake.

"Old man Charles Franklin lives down on the east edge of town. Word is he's crazy, and folks around here keep their distance." Caleb lets us out in the business district and points the way out of town. "Good luck!"

It is dark, and has turned cold again. The main street looks deserted. Even the blinking Christmas lights look lonely.

"Put that notebook away," Miriam said. "We've got some hard traveling.

"Did you hear what he said about the Franklin place?" I asked.

"I heard some of it," she yawned. "I'm not planning to knock on his door anytime soon. Look, it's Christmas Eve, I say we keep rolling. Everyone will be in a great mood, and they'll want to do a mitzvah."

We stuck out our thumbs while we walked. We were chilled again, and a brisk wind swept up dust which swirled on both sides of the road. The few cars which passed us sped by without slowing.

"Merry Christmas to you too!" I thought after each rejection. This wasn't like hitching on a busy stretch, when multiple cars whizzed by, each one cloaked in the anonymity of the crowded road. Here each car was an event, each rejection personal.

We were definitely on the eastern edge of town now. We could still see lights, blinking dimly, across the prairie, a mile back. We stopped where the breakdown lane

widened and put our packs down. Attached to a tall post, on our side of the road, a large, crudely painted message asked, *Where Will YOU Spend Eternity?* Across the road was a wooden shack with a cactus bush in the yard. Even in the gloom we could see the listing board and batten exterior, and the cockeyed tin roof.

“I bet that’s the Franklin place,” I said.

“Yeah, well, were not stopping to say hello.”

Headlights approached. “C’mon, pull over, pull over,” I chanted.

The car slowed, then braked hard, but before we could grab our packs it had spun around and was coming back in our direction, passing by on the other side of us through the sage brush, too close for comfort, lights blinking and horn honking. The occupants yelled something out the window, and we heard them cackle as they headed back to town.

“Maybe they don’t know it’s Christmas Eve,” I said.

“Or maybe that was some kind of Texas mating ritual,” Miriam replied.

We debated whether to head back to town, keep walking east, or look for someplace to hide? Hiding seemed the safest choice, but where? The prairie around us was flat and naked except for a few scraggly bushes. “Get us safely out of Fort Stockton, and I promise I’ll never complain about Vermont again,” I shouted into the wind.

Miriam looked at the Franklin place and said, “We do have another option.”

The door of the shack had opened and I looked at the silhouette of the large man, back lit in the opening, motioning for us to come in. Headlights were approaching again in the distance. I weighted Caleb’s warning against the malice of our tormentors.

Miriam did not hesitate. “We’re going in!” she commanded, and as we crossed the road, I reached for the swiss army knife in my pocket.

He had a thick white beard, long shoulder length hair, dark eyes, set in a deeply wrinkled, weathered face. There was something wild and untamed about him. There was a rifle on the wall, and a bottle of tequila on a table, with a worm suspended just off the bottom, swirling slowly, like a specimen in formaldehyde. An old guitar leaned against a beat up sofa.

“Take off your coats and set down,” he ordered, pointing to the sofa. His voice was gravelly and deep. He turned and went behind a half wall separating the kitchen and the rest of the cabin. He picked up a large knife. I tensed, ready to bolt.

He began chopping and stirring. I noticed a landscape painting on an easel in the corner. There were no holiday decorations. He put three plates on the table, each with a large pie-shaped omelette, dripping cheese and filled with onions and hot peppers. We sat down.

“Merry Christmas,” he said, and put a big forkful of omelette in his mouth.

“Merry Christmas,” we returned. We ate in silence, broken only by the scraping of utensils.

“Where you gals from and where you tryin’ to get to?”

We told him the story of our impulsive trip across country. “I thought an adventure would give me something to write about, and Miriam wanted a break from the cold,” I explained.

He shook his head.

“ Ain’t nobody goin’ to give you a ride out of this town, damn lucky those yahoos didn’t run you over. And two women traveling alone, what was you thinking? And why ain’t y’all home on Christmas Eve?”

“We’re Jewish, ” I told him.

“ But we want to be home for the New Year,” Miriam added, nudging me under the table.

I explained that Jews celebrated Hanukkah.

“Isn’t that just another kind of Christmas?” he asked.

I started to say, ”Yeah it’s basically the same..,” but Miriam cut me off.

“Jews believe the Messiah hasn’t come yet.”

He looked interested. “How long you gonna wait ‘fore you give up?”

And Miriam, who believed that god was man’s creation, and that no messiah, past, present, or future, would save us, simple said, “It’s been 5000 years, what’s a few more?”

Charles Franklin thought about this for awhile, scratched his head, nodded, and said, “It sure would be a mighty sad world if everybody was the same, if we all had the same beliefs. I go for the Bahá’í independent investigation of the truth myself.”

After dinner he invited us to return to the couch and he picked up his guitar. We were stunned when he played a complicated lick, his fingers moving quickly up and down the neck, and more so when he began to sing in a rich baritone, a Woody Guthrie song, *I Ain’t Got No Home In This World Anymore*.

He played, and we sang along with him when we knew the words. When we began yawning, he gave us blankets, set the sofa up as a bed, and said goodnight. We slept soundly and securely, like guests in a five star hotel.

The next morning we squeezed into the cab of his pick up and he drove us seventy-five miles east to a large truck stop. He laughed when I told him he just took us the equivalent of the entire width of Vermont. "Heck," he said, "we got ranches bigger 'n that. Well, lots of traffic coming through here, even on Christmas. You gals should be able to get a ride out of Texas."

He handed me a flat package, and told me to open it when I got back to Vermont. He gave Miriam an old wool hat which she immediately put on, smiling as she pulled it down over her ears.

I dug down into my pocket and pulled out my new swiss army knife. I pressed it into his hand and said, "Merry Christmas Charles."

"Happy Hanukkah," he said, pulling us into a bear hug. "I hope y'all find what you're lookin for."

Thanks to an outcast singing the blues, living on the edge, we survive our mad dash across America, and return in time to welcome the New Year. I glance at his gift again, a small landscape painting— a lone desert cactus leaning in the wind. On the back he has written, "to Sarah, who dropped by on Christmas Eve looking for adventure."

I listen and write as Miriam explains her current favorite religion, Bahaism, to her new love, Angelica (her urgent need to return). It is a refreshing 15 degrees below zero outside, and Lake Champlain howls a glorious greeting. Thick chunks of ice hang off

every roof, each one a poem, magnificent sculptures like dancers, twisting gracefully towards the ground. I laugh, as exploding fireworks proclaim 1972. It feels like home.