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# A Dialogue of Sorts

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A Dialogue of Sorts || **FRED GOWAN**

*Nighttime, Travel, Desert, Conversation, Coffee, and a Dog*  
Mid April 1964

Damn... I'm finding that driving all night is still a drag, even without traffic. Not much chance of traffic on this lonely, New Mexico State Highway heading, I think, in a westerly direction. I know this because when I glance in the review mirror, I can see the first glint of early dawn which has to mean I am moving west.

Like yesterday, I know this new day will also be hot. Since leaving North Carolina and Fort Bragg over two days ago, I have just about worn out my fondness for country music, and the many radio stations in this part of the country that play it all day

long. Maybe I will switch up to some jazz between here and Phoenix.

Time seems to be zipping by me, and the past 10 months spent completing Ranger Training at Fort Benning and the SF Q-Course at Bragg, came close to breaking me, although I now feel relaxed and comfortable, yet for some reason I am alert, even with a minimum of recent sleep. It must be the intensity of the training I received. My thoughts have wandered, and it struck me that I haven't really talked to anyone other than café workers since getting on the road.

With the radio turned off now, the quietness of night is almost solemn, no ambient light on the western horizon, just my headlights, the stars, and no moon at all. Like my mother, I don't mind the stillness of a dark night. Both of us tend to be a little more than reserved, especially around people. She says it is our Cherokee and Comanche Indian blood and our Indian heritage. Still, it has been close to sixty hours without a meaningful conversation. That is a long time, even for me. Conversation would be good sometime today, but at this moment, what I really need is some gas and hopefully a cup of strong coffee.

Stopping to pee is also soon going to be a priority. I have been driving on this high plateau for the past three hours and I notice now that the road has dropped off the plateau into a gentle down

grade, sloping away to what I know is going to be more desert, only at a lower elevation. I catch a faint glimmer of a light in the distance. I sure hope it will be a gas station and maybe a café. As I get nearer to the light I can make out a small gas station building for sure, but don't yet know about any café. Gradually I coast off the ragged blacktop pavement onto the dirt and gravel leading to what appears to be a lone gas pump.

As I come to a slow grinding stop and turn the ignition off, I notice for the first time the hood latch has come loose, and steam, created in part by the cool desert air combined with the heat from my engine and radiator, is coming up from the front of the car. I can see the heat gauge on the dashboard is riding the red hot mark. Must have been more asleep than I thought for the last 20 miles, and here I had two full canteens of water in the trunk. Oh well, I will let it cool for a bit while I wait for the station to open.

I exit the car and begin to slowly stretch and twist my body in the coolness of morning, trying to work out the stiffness that only occurs after many hours of driving. I feel for those long line truck drivers I see on the road. Leaning against the car I nod off for a minute, only to wake abruptly due to a familiar but loud noise coming from the back of the station, it's the sound of doors opening and closing. In a few minutes the doors go through the routine again. It's my guess, the station has no inside plumbing.

A light flickers through a dusty window, and I hear a man cough from inside the station. Another light, a bit brighter, soon appears and then a neon light suddenly flickers and flashes to life in one of the dusty windows, as it announces in bright red letters, "OPEN." The lone gas pump near my car begins to hum. I continue to stretch, as I turn my head, I catch movement near the station; it's a large dog of some unknown breed coming from behind the station. Without a glance at me the dog heads directly to the right front wheel of my car. He sniffs and then proceeds to wash the tire and rim, as only a dog can do. I said not a word as the dog turned in the direction of the cars right rear wheel. Silently he emptied the remainder of his bladder's contents and then sat on his haunches near the pump, this time with his eyes riveted on me.

An old man wearing a wool work shirt, bib, overalls, and scuffed brown cowboy boots, came out the front door and shuffled up to the pump, which was still making sounds but was fully lit up. I just had a strange feeling that an interesting conversation would soon be forthcoming. The old man scratched his groin area, something men all over the world do every day in some manner. Seeing his action, and almost on cue, the dog also took care of his own itch in the same area. The old man, having apparently satisfied his itch, peered at me through squinted eyes and refastened one of his overall shoulder loops. He sized me up and was

checking out my wranglers, belt buckle and riding heel Tony Lama boots.

“I take it you need fuel, is that right Cowboy?” I nodded yes, and he said, “you’re in luck, I think there is just enough gas left in my tank maybe 10 to 15 gallons, to get you into Deming.” “That damn fuel truck from Tularosa is late again this month.”

I nod, and still did not say a word. He looked at me and paused before he zeroed out the gallons with the small ancient hand crank on the side of the pump. He said, “Do you want all I can give you,” I nodded. He stared hard this time and inquired, “You can talk can’t you?” I laughed and nodded yes, his eyes remained fixed on my eyes, their light blue color looking at my brown eyes and beyond. “Care to prove it?” he asked, as he began to pump gas into my car. This time I spoke asking, “Is there someplace close where I can get a cup of coffee?”

Not looking up, the old man says, “I will fix you right up as soon as we finish here.” The dog was on the move again and the old man said “Here Lobo, get away from that tire.”

I said, “no matter, the whole car is going to stay dirty until I reach Phoenix.”

Wiping his hands on an oily rag from a pocket, as he finished pumping the gas, he checked the amount, and as he turned he said “Come on inside.”

“Should I move my car so other customers can get near the pump?” I asked.

He snorted and said with a smile, “other customers? Hell if they come at all, it won’t be until much later, they seem to time it and only stop at the hottest damn part of the day.”

We moved inside the dimly lit room and he motioned for me to sit at a table. The table was about the only thing that looked sturdy in the room. There was an Army cot in the other end of the room. On the table were a few books, an empty soup can containing pencils of various length, tablets, typing paper, and a vintage Remington manual typewriter. All pushed together at one end.

He said, “Don’t mind the mess, I read a bit and write a few lines now and then, but the typewriter is out of ribbon until the Gas truck arrives.” “The driver usually brings me what I need, you know, coffee, bacon, beans and flour, been living on quail eggs and cottontail stew for the past week.” On a small, yet sturdy looking wood stove, the old man had prepared his coffee in one of those gray speckled metal coffee pots of the variety I had only seen in old western movies. The aroma of the coffee was intoxicating. “Hope you don’t mind a few coffee grounds and maybe a speck of eggshell,” he said as he moved a big steaming metal cup toward me. “How about some wild Desert Honey to take the edge off the coffee, I make it railroad strong.”

“Yes,” I said, “I like honey and I also like my coffee strong.”

With the cup in front of me, the old man said, “This is called Wabash Coffee, did you know that?” “Yes” I said. Pausing, he looked at me again and finally said, “Now where did a young buck like you learn about Wabash Coffee?”

I took a few sips from my cup before I slowly replied, “From one of my uncles. During the Depression he traveled across the west looking for work. He rode on freight trains.”

The old man slapped his leg, laughed and said, “By God if you ain’t something, did your uncle also tell you why eggshell is put in the coffee?” I knew the answer, but decided to let the old man tell me. “No, he didn’t tell me that.”

The old man spooned out a bit of eggshell from his cup and said, as he gave out a loud laughing whoop, “Why to make the coffee grounds go to the bottom of the coffee pot.” He paused briefly, and I waited for him to speak, “You don’t see or taste any grounds in your coffee do you?” he asked with a big grin.

I made a show of checking my cup with my spoon and said, “No I don’t see any eggshell or taste any coffee grounds.”

Laughing hard again, the old man roared, “See, it works.” We laughed together, and both of us began to sip the hot tasty coffee in silence. The rising sun in the east began to create a patina of red as it continued to peak over the edge of the plateau, inching



upward into the clear light blue New Mexico sky. I would have to leave soon, and casually looked at my watch. The old man noticed and quietly pulled a pocket watch from one of the buttoned chest pockets of his bib overalls. It was metallic in color, round, and big as a silver dollar. A heavy chain with a fob that resembled an old locomotive was attached to the watch.

He saw me looking at his watch and said, “Want to trade?” As he handed me his watch, I passed him my Rolex GMT Master. His watch was surprisingly heavy and bore the worn comfortable look of many years spent resting in and being removed from, the chest pocket of his overalls. “It’s made from pure New Mexico silver and was presented to me when I retired from the old Tucumcari Railroad.” He looked closely at my watch and then handed it back to me. I hefted his watch again and closely examined the fob before I returned the watch to him. “We had steam locomotives in those days, and our railcars carried the silver ore mined from those holes in the ground, to the smelter. On the return trip we would bring mail, medicine, dynamite and supplies for the miners who lived at the various mine sites, most often for months at a time. The pay was good in those days, but it was a tough life for the miners. I gave it a try for a year before I got lucky and got hired on with the railroad. The old Tucumcari is now part the Santa Fe Railroad.” “How about you, what is your calling?”

I was amused that he used the old word, but

I knew the meaning and told him I was a career Army soldier. I went on to tell him that I was passing through New Mexico on my way to Arizona to visit my great aunt in Phoenix. From there, I would drive on into California, where I would take a plane to my overseas assignment. I explained that my assignment would be Vietnam. He studied me again, and then he looked away fixing his blue eyes on a faded flag tacked to the wall above the door. I followed his gaze as I swallowed the last bit of my coffee and then stood up beside my chair. He slowly rose and stood beside me. Before I turned toward the door I handed him \$20.00 for the gas. He shook his head no, and put his leathered right hand on my shoulder as if guiding me out the door into the warm early morning sunshine. The dog was a persistent cur, and he made one more move toward my car only to be warned away again by the old man. “I have tried to break him from pissing on the customer’s tires, but he’s a slow learner. Anyway he is good company and a watch dog for me. He has good ears for night noise.”

The flathead engine in my old Ford had cooled off and I opened the hood to check the radiator. The old man held the hood for me and motioned toward the small topless wooden barrel near the gas pump. “That’s good rain water he said, use the old can on the side of the barrel to fill your radiator and maybe you should check the water level of your battery.” The radiator was almost dry, and took quite a bit of water to refill

it. The battery did need water so I filled the cells. No point worrying about not using distilled water for the battery. I noisily closed the hood and checked to ensure the latch was snug. The old man followed me and waited as I opened the car door. He looked again into my eyes and said, “Son you be careful over there.” “You know in war the object is stay alive in combat and to make that other son-of-a-bitch die for his country.” I had heard a version of the saying before. I grinned at him as we shook hands.

I slowly drove away from the station, but for some reason I briefly locked eyes with the dog. He looked at me indifferently and seemed to be saying, “It was just your turn Cowboy, and 2 out of 4 ain’t bad.” The old man waved me out of sight. Next stop Deming, which should be close to two more hours of driving by my calculation. I figure to arrive just about the same time the effect of the caffeine strength of the old man’s “Wabash coffee” would be wearing off, and who knows, more conversation might even occur before the new day is over.

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