

Damascus

by

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I have never been easy in my mind about hitchhiking. My brother David likes to preach on the good in everyone, good magnified by another's need. I have been around, on missions and otherwise, and am less sanguine. But the Freightliner driver I met in Denver was based in Moab, leaving me many empty miles from Damascus.

Dawn is barely sifting into starblack as I claim a place at the side of the road draining out of town. The rising east is not kind to this outpost, setting the lights of fastfood joints and gas stations as lurid as whoredom. The four-lane blacktop winds away flat along a dry arroyo to a stark otherness gradually revealed.

A fitful breeze speaks to my vigil in the chill language of the desert. I attend, but the hiss of a slowing car draws my attention back toward town.

A dusty white pickup thrums into the gas station behind me. Its tall, lean driver unfolds, adjusts a weathered ballcap the color of parched soil, and unhurriedly fuels the truck. His face is set off toward the blank beyond as he stands, one hand grasping the fuel release, the other propped on the flared fender of the double axle. Presently the splashback click draws him back, and he tops off, closes the tank, replaces the hose.

I watch him amble to the attendant's kiosk, an unbidden suggestion in my mind: the keys are still in the truck. I kick that devil down. The man is at the kiosk for a spell, jawing with the clerk over coffee. This could be any of a thousand mornings for this man, this clerk, this fringe of life.

As he returns to the truck I wave, try to catch his eye, call "Sir? Ride?"

But his attention is already far down the road. He drives off, red taillights receding steadily to a bare dot that either turns off or curves right, moving to vanishing in the sagebrush dawn.

Already I see mountains piled in the distance like sweepings of night. Their ominous bulk weighs on my heart.

I wrestle my attention back toward the tentative green of the town along the arroyo. I am no part of this. And I cannot go back with this journey unfulfilled.

Please, I pray, send me a vision.

The small silver sedan is almost upon me before I see it. I raise my thumb. The car pulls to a stop. Its passenger window buzzes down as I trot over. A woman's voice asks "Whereya headed?"

"Damascus," I reply.

"Close enough. Drop yer kit in the back an' get in."

The door is barely closed and we are moving. I offer thanks, my eyes following her hand take a blue thermal flask to full, dry lips in a lined and heavy-eyed face framed by a pulled-back thatch of hair.

She sighs.

“That’s better,” she says in a voice still rusty with sleep. “Strong coffee and a little talk will get us through yet. I’m Debbie.”

The little car’s speedometer needle is pushed well to the right of the dial under the calm guidance of her left hand on the wheel.

“Paul. Seems you have pressing business?”

“Could say that. I’m a midwife. Some folks figure they can handle it, till they can’t. *Then* they call, when it gets to be touch an’ go.” She sips the flask, sighs, “Poor things.”

“No hospitals out this way?”

I feel her eyes shift to me, back to the road.

“That’s onna the things you trade to be out here,” she says. Gestures with her flask. “God’s country.”

As though at her summons, the first shaft of sunlight clears the desert floor, carving flames in the flanks of the near distant mountains. What laws would await Moses on these peaks?

“...from around here?”

She is speaking. I apologize, ask her to repeat.

“I’m just sayin’, you’re not from around here.”

“No, ma’am.”

“What brings you, if you don’t mind my askin’?”

“An errand,” I say. “Family business.”

“Family got a claim?”

I shrug.

“Not yet.”

She pulls a long drink from the thermal flask, sighs, sets it in a holder in the gearshift console.

“I’m not after pryin’,” she says, “but the price of the ride is keepin’ me awake as far as Eben’s Fork. Now I’m pushin’ this little scooter about as fast as she could fall, so I’m gonna suggest that you come up with somethin’s gonna keep me between the lines.”

So I think. I think of it as a story. It doesn’t need to have an end.

“My brother’s a trader – y’know, buy and sell stock, bonds, futures, stuff you can’t hold in your hands. He did well for a time, then not so well, not well at all. Then there was a bargain ... my brother made. With ... someone very powerful. And it served him well for a time.”

“What kind of bargain?”

“My brother would do, just, whatever this ... character needed done. You name it. And this powerful someone made him powerful, and promised him some land.”

“Sounds like a square deal. You close with yer brother?”

“Was. We were.”

A mile hisses by. She cuts the thermostat a shade to blue.

“Well, go on. What changed between ya?”

“Women.”

It’s out before I can stop it.

She takes up the flask for a slug, feints another, puts it back. Not a word.

“Not that he took a woman,” I blurt, “not like that. Though, we couldn’t talk the same way...”

All the air around this prosaic little car is violet, pink, orange, alive and dry and dead, all at once, flying past the side windows, hardly moving out ahead.

“It was ... so many ... and, the widow of the man, he....”

We have gone miles, over one and a half a minute, and the clefted mountains seem no closer.

“I’m awake now,” she says. “What about this dead feller? What about that puts you here?”

No.

“I can’t say.”

“Well, you’re one mysterious feller, Paul, but I’ll tell ya this: you say you’re goin’ to Damascus, but I can tell you from personal knowledge there ain’t nothin’ there but a few dried out old people and a gas station, if that yet.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I say. “I’ll know what I see when I see it.”

Feel her eyes again.

“I expect you will.”

Everything is light now, clear.

“Let me out.”

“What, here?”

“Yes! Here.”

“But you’re miles away—“

“I don’t care. Stop the car or I’ll jump.”

The engine’s whine subsides to an empty hum. The forward and side views lock. I open the door.

“Wait! – how much water you got? Food? Cover?”

“Enough.” I pull my pack from the back seat. “Enough. Thanks.”

“Wh—“

I slam the door shut, heft my pack and trot off, not looking back.

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The dust is still cool beneath my boots. Snakes of it swirl up about my ankles as I follow my shadow southwest. My pack shields my back from the first heat. The mountains before me, I walk, content.

Content? If content, I would not be here.

God’s country, she said.

Within the limits of her vision, she saw. But not what I see: the glow from the heart of the stone, ahead and all about. The fire of earth and air, the triumph over water, victorious and consuming.

P.T.

The back of my head feels the sun’s inquisition. I raise the cowl of my hoodie.

He called her P.T., as in Penis Toughener, he said. For me. Go forth and—

The snakes of dust subside. The sun has latched onto my pack, squeezing the liquid from my body.

They are gone. Mother, gone. Father, gone. It is on us now. Me and mine. And you. We must go on.

I top a shallow rise, the mountains clear and surrounding across the dry plain. There is not a whisker of cover the whole way.

She comes to me, a mouth, talking, laughing, pouting, pillowing lips—

I left. For this.

The straps rub raw on my drenched cotton shirt beneath the hoodie. Do not take it off: keep the damp to cool, cover, not parch. But drink, yes, drink: water in the bottle is tepid as nothing, but it is water, don't waste. I twist the cap tight and stow it back in a side pouch.

Our people were merchants in the old times, trading with herders and soldiers and savages alike along this trail.

What trail? The road is miles back. The only other feet on this ground carry a barb aloft.

Great grandfather and grandfather traded beans, grain, meat, hides, women. Brought the Word as well, to whoever would hear it. Father retreated to city life, city trade, safe stories of men awaiting our graves.

We learned nothing but stories....

Lying in a shallow culvert, the sun pressing straight down.

Pressing down on me, lips, hot moist breath.

You can do this, just feel—

I pull the hoodie over my eyes, reach for the water bottle. Crushed; empty.

Try the other.

There's a slow leak in the bottom where the plastic pinched and cracked. I suck at it while my other hand scrabbles in the pack. A couple of postal rubber bands and a couple of snips of bandage tape. Sip. Stow at careful horizontal in the core of the bedroll, injured side up.

Move on.

Foolish to walk in daylight. Shelter, wait.

There is no shelter. Wait, and die.

The mountains stand off, amused: Think he'll make it? So unprepared—

Watch. I rise.

I abjure pain and rest. I disdain love, trust, fellow feeling. I reject my kin. I embrace only suffering, the dry, screaming heat of this land. I will not turn back from Damascus as my forebears have done. I will find the mound, the stone, the worn wooden cross that ends one journey but begins another.

Someone comes.

A dot in the heat shimmer. The source of all radians, as distant as the foothills, more distant, less. A vertical shape. It pulls all in as all flies from it. I take a step, stagger, forward. It flows closer, contours of head and shoulders.

I stumble, pitch forward into a loose circle of stones. Body leaden, calling hurts. A smear of blood on a spike of stone. A scalding breath. A sudden shadow.

I peer up.

A man.

A hand before me. I grasp this different stone, and rise.

“Some fall you took, bud. Y’awright?”

A dry, deep voice. The man is tall, his face in shadow between me and the sun. What features are there slide in and out of focus.

“All right. Thanks.”

“That’s as well. No stayin’ here.”

There is something I want to ask. He is waiting, his wide hat blocking the sun golden around its edges.

“Damascus?”

The hatted head nods back on its way.

“Yonder a piece. There’s a good stream back of the first big stone the west side of the third hill. Line ‘em up to yer left. Keep on a ways past that, might make town by morning.”

“Thanks.”

A nod.

I look on the way he has said. The hills are waiting. I turn back. No one there.

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I go on. My water is spent by the first hill. I find some shade there, but by the time I cross beneath the low saddle to the second hill the sun is well on to noon, so by the end of my passage to the third hill I am barely able to stand. But the stone is there, and in its shelter a cleft, and from this cleft, clear, cool water.

Drink. Rest. Wash. Wonder.

Who was this stranger?

Why Damascus?

Who am I?

Stop.

Am I who I have ever been, Mam and Pap’s son, my brother’s brother, the trucker’s companion from Denver, the midwife’s hitchhiker...

Who am I?

The man who got off the straight road.

He who thirsted.

He who fell.

He who was found.

He who sits now, and drinks....

He who is made new.

*

David,

I write to you from a shaded cabin at the edge of a desert. At the other hand lay the bones of a town, some of which yet stir. It suits me. I do a little trade in local products, and give this letter to a traveler to post.

There is much time to reflect, and to write. Yes, write, as you see, hand to pen to paper, the nearest thing to blood.

This is how I need to do what I am given to do, to make you understand, to bring word to all within reach of post: I've found something here:

Death.

I met Death on my way. He refused to claim me. I puzzled at this, all undeserving of life as I was, as we all are. But I went on, I found my feet, and found the truth: we all walk this earth, we make a fetish of moral right and purpose and commerce, while all the time there is only one leveling truth, and that is death.

We are all hitchhikers on earth, blinkered with the need of meaning and destination, when the true meaning is the journey itself. It is through this long and painful pilgrimage that we prepare ourselves for the ultimate unifying mystery.

Brother, do not visit, even if you do find where I am, not unless you renounce your enslavement to the debris of life.

I have been blessed, and pray every day to embrace this blessing. Be happy for me.

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