

Cover My Tracks

By Kenn Hartmann

My fate was sealed a hundred miles back when I ignored the warning sign LAST GAS 130 MILES!! The significance of the unheeded exclamation points settled in like high desert dust where my sickle silently ground to a halt. Free will's a bitch on a straight & narrow, long & lonely stretch. I checked plugs, battery leads following the false hope of salvation in an easy fix. I shook the sickle side to side listening for a swish – nary a gurgle. Unscrewed the cap & peered clear to tank bottom – dry as the arroyo under the bridge on which I'm stranded. Thirsty too. Parched. A tiny speck of a car appeared on western horizon & it took a half hour to whiz by straddling the white line at 90. I could have flagged him down but I felt no different than a roadside rattlesnake un-poised. That Bo Diddley beat echoed in my head only un-syncopated, out of tune, smorzando. Leaning back, I exhaled 'voodoo you love.' Like the very next sound in this immense desert silence would be a vulture's squeal. A mountain many miles north. A house off road a mile south. A car flew west just barely touching ground. I rolled my sickle down the embankment & under the bridge shade. It's an arroyo; nature's own drainpipe, apt to become a raging torrent & wash away my sickle. I prayed a simple request, 'please don't let it flash flood & don't let no one steal my sickle.' The mountains looked clear of ominous clouds. The water here doesn't flow to the sea; it evaporates. So I headed to the house through the scrub. It turned out to be an abandoned shack weatherworn & beat to shit. The back wall had caved in from a landslide, obliterated – just gone under a pile of hardscrabble that filled most of the interior with rubble. The place smelled of coyotes or mountain lion. Dishes were still on table covered in thick dust. Maybe the old prospector died in mineshaft collapse that caused the avalanche. It smelled of death - dead 50 years, a century. Maybe just hallucinations or maybe a strange haze enveloped me. Maybe he packed out rich. Maybe he never found gold or silver & just split. I found an old can in a shed. I hiked out like the devil hunkered on my shoulders. I walked awhile on highway & held up rusty can & thumb – the first vehicle screeching to a halt. He was a jovial Philippine who said, "hey, hop in, hey you left gas can on side of road." I said it's just a prop - got bullet holes in it & filled with rocks.

He was a holy roller who tried to convert me on the thirty-mile ride to town. He took me to a café; "a Christian thing to do." He pointed at Buddha statue on a shelf & said, "Hey look, a fat Santa." I asked why poke fun at other beliefs? He warned me about the worship of false idols. I said someone here may think it sincere. He asked, "What do you believe?" Nothing. I finished my French toast & split. A taste of spirituality is better than a full-blown religious rant. I got out while the getting's good. Borrowed a gas can at a service station & hitchhiked into desert. A semi stopped & I climbed into cab. The truck driver was Muslim. "I'm Palestinian." He tried to convince me about Jews. Yeah, I know the story man; everyone's vile but you. He said, "I don't hate Americans." I tried to change subject, 'hey how's the comic book porn over there? I bet you've seen all kinds of shit.' He continued the rant; I asked if there is any hope? "None!" I asked how many gods are there? "Only one!" Yeah,



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right. I spotted my landmark - the bullet riddled rusty can on roadside. I told him to pull over at the bridge. I pretended to walk into desert, waiting until he pulled away before going to my sickle. For some reason I felt better knowing no other human being on earth knew where I was. I poured gas into tank thankful I didn't get washed away in flash flood, eaten by a mountain lion or bit by a serpent. Could have been worse. Could have caught a ride with a Mormon Scientologist freak believer in Crop Circles, Big Foot & Loch Ness Monster. Or even worse: a Republican or a Democrat but they don't pickup hitchhikers. It's the law, their law.

Back at the station, I topped off my tank & returned gas can to the young attendant who was glad to see me. He gleefully turned to his boss &

shouted, "I told you he'd come back!" I said, united we stand brother.

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