

Music City Detour

Brake lights flash, he slows, then all traffic stops. “Damn,” he says, hitting the steering wheel. The vehicles creep ahead and halt; fumes and heat accumulate.

“Fucking Nashville—what’s going on now?” Brian asks, but the traffic gods do not answer. He’s just started his vacation and doesn’t need a highway backup in ninety-five degree heat. Driving west with no air conditioning, the sun has been blazing into his side of the car, roasting him. He normally takes the parkway around, but today he decided to strike through the heart of the city and see its downtown on the fly. On previous trips the parkway had been slow, clogged with Opry or football fans.

The vehicles roll forward, then stop. He glances at the temperature gauge in his ten-year-old Nissan; the needle has moved. Because of the usual obstructions and a bend in the highway, he can’t see far enough ahead to determine the severity of the backup, nor what’s causing it. He can hear the beat of somebody’s bass, barely audible over the idling engines. Waves of diesel fumes swirl past his nose. He’s trapped.

He looks at his watch and sighs. He told them he’d be there at six. His girlfriend and her parents will be waiting, with

dinner ready, and he doesn't want to be a minute late. He misses her, being so far away, and more than once he's hammered his thumb or sawed a stud too short thinking about her. He builds tract housing outside Raleigh, North Carolina and loves his job, but his heart lies back home in Illinois. He pictures her family's white farmhouse, setting back from the road on a rise; the massive maple tree shading family picnics; the back porch where they first kissed—all these things soothe his mind until he sees a flashing, electronic sign ahead: EXPECT DELAYS—flash—JAMBOREE TRAFFIC—flash—USE EXIT 49—1.5 MILES.

The mystery solved, he unfolds a map to find a way out of this mess. There's another exit close by, but he's not sure where he is in relation to it. One and a half miles at this rate would take another hour and the temperature needle has crept further to the right. This could be more than a delay—he has to get off the highway and start moving.

A Harley rider pulls alongside and Brian looks at him, throwing his hands up in the universal gesture of disbelief. The biker smiles and appears to say, "Follow me." Brian lets him swing in front, and soon the guy is stabbing his finger ahead and down toward the right shoulder. It's his escape and Brian steers onto the exit waving—he should be able to backtrack to the parkway using city streets. Spotting a wrecker yard full of

disabled vehicles, he quickly looks away. He sets the heat and blower on high—wishing he had changed the radiator fluid, replaced hoses and bought a cell phone, but he’s been trying to save money.

The ramp becomes a curving street that ends at a light. Which way is east? With a fifty-fifty chance, he swings left on the green only to discover he should have gone right; he’s now driving directly toward the jamboree—in heavy traffic. The beat grows louder, spilling fans out of Honky-Tonks, parked cars and buses—the girls in skirts and boots, the guys in jeans and hats and everybody marching toward the music. Ahead and to the right they swarm over a bridge, and just beyond, across the river, he spies their obvious destination—a large stadium.

He eases the clutch in and out, his ankle stiff, and now he hits the brakes again—it’s bumper to bumper in a jumbled mix of cars and pedestrians. He glances at the temperature gauge; the needle’s in the red. Noticing a break in traffic, he swings a sharp U-turn and nearly hits a cowgirl—could she be charged with drunk walking? He can’t believe his luck—heading east with the heat on, everything ass backwards.

The street he’s on connects to the parkway, but now he hears sirens, the traffic slows, and then he sees flashing red and blue lights—and lo and behold—there’s an accident ahead. Coming to a side street that’s clear, he turns left in front of

oncoming cars and receives the blast of a horn. Past a tunnel of scrub trees and then an underpass, he enters an industrial area: warehouses and trucking companies, a city bus lot, razor wired fences protecting trailers or metal scrap heaps. No crowds or traffic jams here. According to the map there's a route ahead that connects to the parkway. A right and a quick left and he's on the street, the Nissan's worn suspension thudding over potholes and jagged hunks of retread.

Past the brick remains of a mill, the views from his car grow more desolate. Huge mounds of construction debris and piles of logs—some trailing kudzu—are scattered about like forgotten temples. Just to his north lies the river, and along its bank several rail lines fade into the hazy distance. Rows of freight cars sit vandalized, their rusted sides defaced by graffiti. He leans forward, his muscles tense: up ahead the street intersects railroad tracks, but something's wrong. Where there should be warning lights and barrier gates, there's a solid guardrail. He's come to a dead end.

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Brian rolls up to the barricade and stops. "Son of a bitch." The map had deceived him—they must have closed this crossing years ago. He needs to take a break and regroup. The temp needle has retreated into the safe zone, so he shuts the engine off. Climbing out of his cramped driver's seat, he opens the

hood to find no hissing leaks, only the usual ticking noise. He turns around and stares across the tracks: his escape route continues on the other side, close but unreachable.

From a cooler in the back seat, he grabs a plastic bottle and pours water over his head, then takes a long drink. It tastes good and he relaxes—it could be worse—the car is okay and he’s just an hour late. He’ll study the map in a few minutes and find a clear way to Route Twenty-Four—then on to Paducah and then home.

Eating a sandwich, he strolls absentmindedly onto the tracks. Creosote fumes rise off the crossties as cicadas buzz from scattered trees—the area is peaceful at least, compared to the madness downtown. Facing south, he stops chewing and squints. There’s something on the tracks—like a white hump. After a few seconds of disbelief, he determines it’s the back of a person. “Shit.” He stands frozen, watching. The figure—about a hundred yards down the line—moves, shifting posture. Brian goes back to his car, grabs the water bottle and starts walking. Nearing closer, he sees a hatless gray head, a dirty tee shirt—it’s a tiny man sitting Indian style on a piece of cardboard, dead center between the rails. He appears to be mumbling and gesturing with his hands—obviously some crazy, messed-up hobo.

“Whatcha doing buddy?”

The man jerks around, his mouth open in surprise. “Ya’ll shouldn’t sneak up like that. Nearly give me a heart attack.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to surprise you, but I noticed you sitting on the tracks—don’t you think that’s a tad unhealthy?”

The man smiles. “You’re funny, mister—you a comedian?” His front teeth are missing and a long scar is visible through the stubble of his gray beard.

“No, just wondering. Hey, you want some water? Pretty darn hot today.”

“Sure, can’t hurt.” He takes a long, gulping drink. “Ah, much better. I bet you’re lost. That street always gets ’em—they don’t lead nowhere.”

“I’m not lost—I just got balled up by some shindig they’re having downtown. Hey, you got any family?”

“Course I got family, they just ain’t here. Ain’t seen my brother in thirty some years, I reckon, but I am going to see my momma. Might run into him, too. I never knowed my daddy.”

“Well, where’s your mother? If she’s close by, I can drive you there.”

The man rocks back and slaps his knees, laughing in a sort of coughing wheeze. “Why she’s in heaven.”

“Heaven?”

“Yes sir, and I’m real excited about seeing her again—it’s been a long time. Wish you could of knowed her, she’s was so

sweet. I've never forgotten her, no sir, never. I've missed her.
You know what?"

"No, what?"

"Today is the happiest day of my life." He throws a hand in the air for emphasis and continues. "It's beautiful out here, isn't it? Everything bright and sunny. You got a momma, son?"

"Yeah, back home in Illinois. That's where I'm headed—supposed to be at my girlfriend's tonight—for supper."

"That's real nice. You be sure to see your momma. You going to marry that girl?"

"Well, yeah, soon as we get enough money saved up."

Brian is confused—his attempt to talk sense into the man has wilted in the heat.

"Hey," he says excitedly. From a scuffed and taped satchel he removes a piece of paper; it's folded into a small square.

"Take this, it ain't much, but use it for the wedding." He hands it to Brian—it's a twenty-dollar bill.

"Oh, no buddy—that's nice but you should keep it yourself." But the man smiles and nods his head rapidly, his eyes radiant. Brian places the bill in his wallet. "Well thanks—I'll let my fiancée know."

"Good luck to ya. You best go home now—she'll be waiting." Turning on his cardboard, he again faces the sweep of track to the south—the rails curving in a giant arc before

vanishing behind a thicket of pale, listless trees.

Brian stands motionless, watching the man's scrawny back. His shoulders rise and fall with his breath, the stains on his shirt vivid, the bristly head now reminding him of a newborn's—delicate, precious—awaiting its mother's kiss.

He turns and walks slowly over the crossties, tossing his half eaten sandwich to the ground. The droning buzz of insects returns, pulsing in his ears as he pushes off the sticky ties, the sharp, hard gravel. The Nissan wavers in the distance like a mirage, the sun gleaming off its hood in a brilliant white—everything shimmering—vibrating softly in the day's hot, hazy light. Nearing his car and thinking of home, tears fill his eyes—his mind suspended, for now at least, in a state of grace.