

Darts

By Alexander Saxton

We ran out of cigarettes on the second day of the drive. We'd been going through desert about seven hours, hour-and-a-half since we'd passed the last town, when Lizzy unrolled the window, reached for the pack of smokes, and found that it didn't have that comforting little rumble of weight in the hand.

"Shit," she muttered. Turned the box upside down. All that came out was the dead dried-up body of a fly.

"Shit", she said again. "You got any darts?"

Honestly, I did have one left, but I was saving it for me.

"Nope," I told her.

"Shit," she said a third time. "We gotta stop and find some more."

"I thought you were trying to quit,"

"Yeah," she admitted. "But there's trying to quit and there's trying to quit."

"Is there, though?" I said.

"Shut the fuck up and drive," she told me. "Pull over if you see something."

Well, we didn't see anything but dust and dried cattle bones for another hour & twenty minutes. By then, it was mid afternoon, and Lizzy was in a vitch-riolic mood. Heat wasn't helping, either. Air con in Lizzy's busted old toyota'd gone to shit, and the salt flats burned on either side with reflected sun. It must've north of 40 degrees.

But in the distance, I thought I saw something through the glare.

"That look like a building up ahead?"

"It fuckin' better be," she said.

I slowed. First time the speedometer had dropped below 100 in who-the-hell-can-say. Through the waves of heat, a low, brown building swam into focus.

An old sign nailed to the side:

"Jim's Cigarettes, Gas, and Convenience."

"Sweet fuckin' jesus, hallelujah," Lizzy muttered.

I pulled in.

"Well," I asked. "You going in?"

"Nah," she told me. "You are."

“Why me? You’re the one who needs darts.”

“Fuck off, you need ‘em too,” she said. “Plus, you have to go because you’ve been sitting on that secret one the last hour-and-a-half.”

Well. When they got you they got you.

Ninety seconds later, I finished up apologizing and climbed out of the car. Dusty. Bright. No awning covering the gas pumps, which, looking at them for the first time, were way too cheap. 93 cents? What *year* was this? Guess demand was lower than supply way out here in the middle of nowhere. So I filled up, even though the pumps were covered in rust and made a groaning noise that worried the hell out of me as the counter ticked up. God damn. It was scorching out. Just a minute or two in the sun and I could already feel myself beginning to burn.

Well, nothing exploded, so when the tank was full I slotted the nozzle back into its rusted sheath and went inside. Lights out, and the dimness a relief from the reflection of the flats. But even out of the sun, the heat inside was stifling. I blinked; it took a moment for my eyes to adjust.

The goddamn place was empty. No Jim at the counter, selling his gas and cigarettes. Nobody in the aisles, either.

“Hello?” Nothing.

The shelves were empty, too. I mean *empty*. I walked down one aisle looking for an office door or something, and as I went I ran my finger along one shelf, leaving a dark, gleaming line in the dust. Shit, some store.

At the end of the row, a rust-spattered ice-cream fridge hummed like a swarm of bees. Inside it was mostly frosted up. Two popsicles and a klondike bar frozen at the dirty bottom, along with an old microwave dinner. It looked like all three had been soaked and then refrozen at several points in the last two decades. “Hello?” I said again. Again, nothing.

On a shelf running along the back wall, I finally found some merchandise. A bar of soap, a dusty bottle of shampoo. Wonderful. Turning back up another aisle, I found a beat-up box of cereal, and some old-fashioned weed paraphernalia. The next aisle must have been tobacconist’s row, because two crushed boxes of menthols sat nestled in the dust.

I said, “Eugh”. But I took one.

And then I heard a noise further along. Noticed a green, grimy curtain hanging in one far corner of the shop, and called out again. When I got no answer, again, I went and stuck my head around that curtain.

Behind it I found a back-room with one wall taken up by a row of empty milk refrigerators. In front of them, two old men sat in foldable chairs, playing cards on the grimy top of an old cooler.

One of the old guys was Black, the other one white, though both had the same bluish-grey undertone to their skin, and the same web of cataracts across their eyes. Both of them were smoking; the white guy had two cigarettes hanging from his lips at the same time, even though he was connected to an IV drip and had an oxygen tank feeding tubes into his nose.

“Oh, hello,” I said.

“Hi,” said the Black guy. The white guy said nothing. He was the older of the two, the more emaciated. Seemed to be swimming in and out of consciousness.

“Is, uh, this place open?” I asked.

“24 hours,” said the Black guy.

“Do, do you guys work here?”

“Nope.”

“Oh. Do you know where I could find someone who does work here?”

“JIM DOES,” shouted the white guy. Suddenly awake and aware and breathing heavily as his head hung forward over a shrunken chest.

“Yup. It’s Jim’s convenience, ain’t it?” said the Black guy.

“Well, do you know where I can find Jim?” I asked.

“Nah.”

“THEY GOT TO FIND JIM,” shouted the white guy.

“Yep. No doubt about it,” said the Black guy. He played an ace. Seemed to be about the sixth ace on the lid of that cooler.

“Do either of you know when he’ll be back?” I said.

Neither of them said anything.

“Do they have cigarettes here?”

“Course, brother,” said the Black guy. “You passed right by em.”

“Do they have any that aren’t menthols?”

“Nah.”

I noticed their pack of cigarettes on the cooler. Regular, non-menthol.

“Well where did you get them, then,” I asked.

“WE GOT EM HERE,” shouted the white guy.

“No doubt about it,” said the black guy.

“Ah,” I said. “Okay. Well, uh, I’ll just take the menthols then.”

“THEY GOT TO FIND JIM,” shouted the white guy.

“No doubt,” said the black guy.

“Alright,” I said. “I’m just going to... leave money on the counter, if you could tell Jim when you see him. Thanks for your help.”

I pulled back through the curtain.

“Hey brother,”

I pushed my head back through the curtain.

“You sure you don’t want to buy something?” said the black guy. He gestured to a wall of shelves which I thought might not have existed a moment before. I stepped forward into the room and squinted. The shelves were full of small, taxidermied animals.

“We got all kinds, man,” he said. “Jim gets em from the road. Makes em up, you know. Possums and stuff. All kinds.”

"WE GOT ALL KINDS," shouted the white guy.

"I'm good," I said.

"Pssh," said the black guy. "City folk. You don't got twenty dollars?"

"I'm not from the city," I said.

"Everywhere's the city compared to here."

"TELL HIM WE GOT ALL KINDS," said the white guy.

I left cash on the counter, and left Jim's convenience with two packs of menthols and a taxidermied squirrel.

"What the fuck are *these?*" said Lizzy, as I passed her the smokes.

"They're all they had," I said.

"And what the fuck is *this??*" She recoiled as I handed her a taxidermied squirrel.

"His name's Samuel," I said, starting the car. "He was only twenty bucks."

We drove the next several hours in silence, chain-smoking menthol cigarettes.