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## **Fort Smith, Arkansas—A Monologue**

By Justin Taylor

**“I’d be a rich man, it’s true  
If I could make a living out of lovin’ you  
These two hands know what to do  
If I could make a living out of lovin’ you  
I’d be a millionaire in a week or two  
Yeah, I could make a living out of lovin’ you”  
—Bon Jovi**

The radio plays one sloppy country cover after another. This station—if it is a station and not a tape—has no commercials. Or perhaps another option: the Citgo company runs this station commercial free...with one proviso. To wit—every three minutes or so the music is drowned out by one of two voices, either a man’s or a woman’s. Each has one recorded piece of advice for whoever is in a Citgo at whatever time of night (morning, actually) this is. For future reference, I will call them, respectively, The Man and The Woman. The Man says: if you’re hungry this is the place to go, because they have a varied and extensive selection of salty, sweet, nut-oriented and hot ‘eats.’ The Woman says in case of a “snack attack” this is the place to go, for all the same reasons. I despise The Woman.

Why despise The Woman, you ask?

Hunger is an actual problem. The snack attack is not real. Humans were not born able to feel pain, heat, cold, hunger and snack attack. Snack attack is a construct—The Woman an agent of the Simulacrum, the Masonic Great Architect Jahbulon, the dark evil Lovecraftian Underlords of the Market Economy.

The angry reptilian part of me (the part which, after pissing, stands there looking for a few seconds thinking dark half-thought thoughts about former lovers) wants to say this is true of all women. The higher, more reasonable—mammalian—parts of me want to say that these mean thoughts about The Woman are unfair, that the allegations of the reptile-me are untrue, etc... But fuck 'em—reptile and mammal, lungfish and mole rat—they're not hashing it out on my dime so the issue remains as it stands: foregrounded but unresolved. Fine. But if The Woman (that is, this woman, not all women) is working on behalf of Dark Forces then The Man must be a member of their special elite unit: a *gladiator-cum-archon* serving Our Demiurge of Sparkle And Fade. He dazzles you with colored packages, with the hope of alleviating a real need—hunger—when it is widely known that no amount of Doritos (cool ranch, extra cheese, fiery ranch, nacho, guacamole, eXtreme, etc.) or gas station coffee or tender beef nuggets in foil-wrap (with oxygen-absorbant silica packets to prevent aging), can cure hunger. These things *can* satiate a snack attack, for illusory desires are best fulfilled by illusory solutions. Thus, if we damn one, we must damn both... And, if we are issuing sentences, The Man's ring of hell ought by rights to be deeper and hotter and darker. "Buy an extra, for later," The Man's bit concludes. And if I could I would sever his grubby, reaching fingers. The bastards try to get up to the knuckle in your asshole, keep you hooked halfway to the next Citgo.

I do not believe that sitting at this table at this gas station—waiting for the sunrise like a fretful mother waiting for a teenage daughter to stonedly fumble her key into the front door on a given Friday night—will yield up a revelation of any kind. Yet I sit, rolling and smoking cigarettes I neither crave nor want. Why? Because they are there. Drinking Mountain Dew forty-four ounces at a time—I think this is my seventh refill tonight—not because it keeps me going (which it does) but because it is there.

Applicable philosophical lesson: the consumptive urge is not related to the survival instinct.

Likelihood of application in the given scenario: zero.

The clerk wants five minutes to smoke a cigarette of her own. She has long thin white ones and I can hear her coughing constantly in the back, but every time she lights one up and starts to tell me the worries of her day (which began at eleven p.m. when the shift started) a rush of customers come in. And customers always need.

These are the directions to the freeway.

We are out of Marlboro 100's.

The bathroom is straight back (I laugh at all the big men because earlier I masturbated into the men's room toilet. Why? Because **it** was there... Take that pronoun however you like.)

I could be bitter.

Earlier she wouldn't give me the fried potato wedges that she was throwing out anyway. She said they tasted bad after a full day under the hot lights, which suggested to me a lack of clarity of communication between herself and myself. Clearly she misjudged the straits I am in though I cannot imagine how. I have been clear, as clear as a beggar or a bell, and I am clearly hungry—or at least beset by snack attack—and at any rate more or less in need. More in need, at the very least, than the people with working cars and clear destinations, who pour in with clear questions and leave with clear answers and have clear eyes because they aren't sitting here going bloodshot like an old rummy in a cumulus choke of bali shag, floating or treading or considering the prospect of drowning in an endless self-service ocean of warmish sparkling sugars hued like watery electricity. Even if I have, somehow, been less than perfectly clear, there is still our busted van to render the situation lucid.

Our busted van? Well, yeah, I guess I should have said so before, but we are on the way back to Gainesville, Florida from California. It is July 26, 2002, and our dirty-orange 1979 VW Microbus blew two tires today after blowing two tires yesterday—the Navajo who replaced our first set of blown tires, it seems, fucked us pretty badly. Us in this scenario is me, my housemates Peter and Adam, this guy Kealan we know and are sort of friends with who made the trip possible by providing the transportation and doing all the driving (but who, it is worth noting, ran out of money in Tucson (on the way *to* the coast) when he spent his last \$10 on a half-gallon of discount tequila to prepare us for a coming dust storm). And then there's Molly—a fat, friendly, drooly dog with some sort of breathing problem that makes her wheeze all night while we sleep, and sometimes we wake up hearing that bad noise and think Molly is choking to death and we grab for her but she is okay and smiling like dogs do, drooling on the dirty floor... But this isn't

a story about us. This is a story about me, and it takes place while all three men, and the dog, are in the van sleeping.

As I was saying before, these are dire straits that I am in. Nonetheless I have chosen not to be bitter, since the woman (that is, the woman working at the counter here, not Our Lady of the Perpetual Playback Loop: The Woman) meant only to save me from a bad meal I don't need. Instead I hate The Man whose recorded voice convinced me the potato wedges were worth thinking about, worth pursuing, worth desiring—like when the memory of past sex is transformed by your inner reptile to a dream of future sex.

If I were capable of running this Citgo Foodmart I would insist that the clerk take her break. I would do her duties for her, gratis of course. I would insist she smoke two cigarettes. I would insist she smoke ten. My hand and forearm have begun to hurt from writing. Sunrise cannot come soon enough. It feels to me like sunrise may never come. Imagine how the clerk must feel.

The red-and-white checkerboard of the tile on the floor induces a form of madness casually left out of preeminent medical journals—I am thinking especially of the DSM series—and the hour is weird enough that the fact that I've never read a preeminent medical journal bothers me not at all. There are fifty-five bottles of Pennzoil on the top shelf at the back of the aisle closest to me. I can dream worse fates than that of this clerk, but I don't want hers any more for the fact that I want others even less.

Earlier today a prodigiously fat man, wearing sweat shorts held up with suspenders that climbed the seeming acres of his heaving gut (also a green mesh hat and orthopedic tan socks that went up to his knees), said that he used to have a microbus like ours—not just orange either. *Blue and purple an yeller an flowers too*; back before he went into the service. *Used to get wasted and sit in the driver's seat, talk about going places but not moving nowhere. Hair down to m' ass...back then.* I couldn't picture him with hair, period. His advice—*you want good tires for cheap? Well ya'll get shaved, showered and new clothes before you go looking.* I did not say that if we had all that shit we wouldn't be staying overnight in a Citgo in Ft. Smith, Arkansas, for the sake of saving the \$50 towing-service charge required by the one place in town that was open when we pulled up at sunset.

I hate the pen I am writing with but my greatest fear is that it will run out of ink. This pen is the closest thing to the type of pen I prefer that I have seen in weeks. The pens they sell in gas stations are fucking terrible. Fucking jokes is what they are. Fuck Bic, fuck Papermate, fuck souvenir pens hardest. If the pen bears the words GREETINGS FROM and then the name of the place where you are buying it, it will not work for shit. This is a rule. How much fucking trouble would it fucking be for these fucking Citgo fucking bastards to fucking vend me a fucking black fucking micro-point fucking Uniball with visible fucking inkflow?

A man in a turquoise button-shirt with blue suspenders and beige pants gives me a bad look. The clerk says good morning to him. If he says anything to me I'll fucking kill him. I'll take his cock off with my grimy fingernails and use it like a hand puppet. I'll make him talk to it. Or...maybe I'll pretend to have a drawl and talk to him blandly, pleasantly, about bits of local

news I've picked up sitting here. A man was murdered recently but the clerk didn't know him, which surprised her, because she's lived here a long time.

The man I dreamed briefly of castrating (who was very old, by the way) left some time ago without saying anything to me at all. Nobody says anything to me save the clerk, who (after everyone leaves, even the two fat ladies—one in a blue sweatsuit, one in red) will once again begin to tell me about her day, both of us knowing full well that as soon as she lights up her cigarette and says “I ain't had the chance to fix myself a breakfast sausage yet,” a white man or two black men or a white woman with a Spanish man will walk through the door. *What of the restroom?* they will ask. *What of the interstate? What of my snack attack, Goddamnitall!?!?*

Men are scum. I know this because I have just used the bathroom and found caked, dried urine on the seat. This since the last time I used the bathroom, merely half of a forty-four ounce Mountain Dew ago. This means the transgression took place in the interim. The possible culprits are few—I suspect the old man in turquoise; this despite the fact that I know he did not even go near the restroom. I have taken care to wipe the seat clean after I use the toilet, in or out of the event of splashing, simply because I respect the clerk who would have to clean my urine if I were not so respectful. With a wad of toilet tissue I clean the dried urine of other men, long gone in their automobiles and free of the wrath of my piercing gaze. And how I would glower if they were still here!

After hours of peeing bright yellow, so much that I began to wonder if my body was bothering to metabolize the soda at all, I have just peed clear. Am I purified then? Of what? Is this some bizarre quirk of the occult or a diet fad waiting to happen? Ought I contact L. Ron Hubbard or Dr. Atkins? Is this worthy of waking up my traveling companions? Of sharing with the clerk, or her less-friendly-seeming co-worker who has just arrived? No, I shall keep this to myself till I see how it pans out. There is lots of beer in this store—wine spritzers, too—but the clerk and I both know I have nowhere to go drink it but here and that is against the rules, besides which I need that money. Perhaps at sunrise I will purchase a single beer to celebrate. If the clerk will allow this I will purchase two beers and give her the other one. If she will not drink it I will drink them both, having already purchased them and not wanting them to go to waste. All sales final and so on.

A man enters in a grey shirt who resembles my former landlord. It would be amazing if they were relations but I will not ask and will thus never know, unless I see the former landlord—at a cocktail party, play opening, or elsewhere—and ask him if he has a relation that lives in or might pass through Ft. Smith, Arkansas, but even if I see my former landlord I won't ask. My hand and arm are shot through with pain. I think the pen is winning. If I see the sunrise I will write it down but must rest for at least a short time. I know if I want to masturbate again I will need to use the other hand or else risk serious injury. This is not a problem; the other hand will do. Anyway, I don't think I will want to masturbate again. I will finish reading the book I brought with me. I will roll and smoke more cigarettes. Maybe I will talk to the clerk. Maybe I can spare enough money for a potato wedge or a chicken strip. If she puts out fresh ones, juicy inside their newly goldened breading that will appear almost virginal beneath the hot lamp, as if

the chicken strips were little girls dressed up for first communions, then maybe I will take a chance and trust The Man.

At sunrise there are three employees. The clerk, my clerk, leaves without saying goodbye. The two other clerks do not regard me. It is foggy out. I ask if it is usually foggy out in Arkansas at this time. The short fat clerk says sometimes it is, but other times not. She turns to the thin, pale one who looks vaguely demonic and tells her a story about driving down some road they both know but I do not. The potato wedges and chicken strips are gone. In their places are biscuits with sausages and pigs in blankets that I know to be fresh but do not want. I hate The Man—more than ever. I want a beer more than ever. I refuse to have more soda. I can smell my own body odor, dirt and stale and musk through denim. I need a shower. No! I crave a shower. I need to sleep. But maybe not just yet. The question of where to drink the beer remains.

My 44 oz. cup is filled with ice. My tongue is stained green from the Mountain Dew. I hurt myself trying to scrape it clean. I will eat some of the ice and wait for the rest to melt. I will eat ice instead of sausage and I will drink melted ice instead of ice-cold beer. The sky is pink like tender flesh beyond the highway, blue higher up, black nowhere. Anymore.

A flatbed truck carries a bulldozer toward a construction site. In Oklahoma, a barge hit a bridge three months or so before which is why I-40 is still closed which is why nobody all night knew where the interstate was (the detour being something on the order of seventy miles) which is also why I got stranded here, in Ft. Smith, Arkansas. Here instead of anywhere else, forever and never again. Amen.