

Outta Gas (Save for a Baggie)

Cannon D. Shealy

“To do the useful thing, to say the courageous thing, to contemplate the beautiful thing: that is enough for one man’s life.”

—T.S. Eliot

First the car had done this odd bucking in a well-spaced series of three, then the acceleration had gone out completely. Doug put the pedal to the floor and yet the speedometer went steadily down from eighty to seventy, anyway.

“Motherfucker,” he muttered.

He picked his foot up once, prayed to a god he did not hold to, and slammed back down, the orange marker sinking to fifty now.

“Motherfuck!” He slammed his dash and put his free hand to his forehead while he coasted to the right and put his hazards on once the car fell to ten. Just for shits, he waited to see if it would keep coasting at a steady two, but it parked him right beside the veil of a slowly dying forest, shades of green and yellow and orange and red into forever.

“Motherfuck,” he called out, raising his head to the sky and rubbing his eyes. “It said half-gallon. *A half-gallon*. God, fuck.” He grabbed his phone out the cup holder and looked at the bottom of the screen, reading two miles and four minutes left on the trip to the Claro Lago, Minnesota Tesoro. “You’d think it’d read right, you’d *fuckin think* . . .”

He shook his head and threw his left side into his door and stepped out with a rusty, pinched creak. He looked at the gray specks and indent on his driver’s side—making the passenger’s side rear door merely a cosmetic—and thought, *You old bitch*, trying to curse both the lady who’d t-boned him and the Honda itself. Then he thought of what Gordon would say about his comment about the fuel gauge: *You really expect this shit to be reliable?*

“Yeah, well . . .” Doug kicked the front tire and found it dishearteningly malleable. “Well, y’know.”

He reached in and turned the whole works off, cutting off some New Orleans-born junkie singing about how he was a junkie from New Orleans. He sat with his legs out the door, the toes of his Air Force Ones hardly a quarter-inch beyond the white line. He knew it was going to be like this when he realized he’d left his phone at home; of course he couldn’t have a good night, and why should he? This was one of his long *bad* streaks, and it would probably carry on for the remainder of the year.

“Because that’s just what life is,” he told some blondie in a Chevy Equinox cruising at a smooth fifty—still twenty above the posted limit, he was sure she felt real *bad*—“Just the long shitty periods and those *little* good ones, right?”

Yeah, and he’d already had his fucking dose of that. All summer had been a great damned streak for him: license in May, vacations to LA and Seattle in June, got stoned all July and *still* somehow got a raise, and August was filled with awkward, lovely sex with his girl. And even September had started off good—junior year began with all A’s, and he saw those same New Orleans junkies live on the

twenty-third with that same lovely girl. Even the t-bone on the thirtieth hadn't seemed that bad, even despite Mom taking half of what he was comped as a "lesson in responsibility"; what did he care, he had a consistently-paying job and drove in his girl's car more, anyway.

"But fuckin October, October fucked me. She gets that whole foreign-exchange thing sorted out and tells me *after*, fucking thanks. Gonna go there and fuck some . . . Spanishman, or whatever they're called. A fucking Ponce de Leon, that dumbass."

For a brief moment he wondered who he could possibly be bitching to—whether some ghost of his dad or dog or something or just his sad old self—and what good it did them to hear him out. He figured it was a far cry from a positive encounter, but that's why nobody ever listened anyway.

"Then, I lose my damn job, because I said I didn't see anything when Ben hit that damn wax vape in the break room, *they could see on the cameras I didn't even touch it*, but *no*, whatever, fuck. Now no more half-price Wendy's, guess I'll shoot myself. Then . . ." he motioned to the rear of the car. "Bullshit. Gets an F, like all my teachers like to gimme."

He'd turned it over countless times in his head, wondering if he was the *real* dipshit, but a solid four-out-of-five times he concluded that he was doing his job as a person *right*, and staying in his own lane, unlike everyone else. At this thought, he stepped out into the eastbound lane of the little county road he found himself on. "Even my damn friends can't stay in their own lane. Kyle borrows thirty bucks and hasn't fuckin returned it, even though he has a damn job and I'm outta one."

He was glad he'd brought his "vintage" leather jacket and had worn his Bape stocking cap—as he did almost daily—to at least give off the aura of financial comfortability. He zipped the jacket up, giving his frontside a quick smooth, all the way to the knees of his jeans, and slammed the door of the '02 Civic—*Old enough to fuckin drink, she is*—twice before it caught and stayed shut, perhaps accidentally. He walked around the hood and threw open the passenger door, gazing down at his passenger side.

A small, blue, cylindrical bong sat sideways on the seat, freshly cleaned and without even water resting in the bottom. Leaned up against the shaft was a king-size Butterfinger bar he'd taken from the store, the wrapper unmolested. The last thing he grabbed was the tall fuck of the holied SmartWater he loved so much.

"Got this for tomorrow morning, dammit," he said to these possible idly-listening spectres, shaking his head, "but I guess there's a more immediate fuckin use for it." He shoved the bottle in his right jacket pocket and found that at least it was held well, as was the bong in his left. He threw the door shut and opened the rear, dug in the tracks of the passenger seat, and found the jackpot through memory alone. It was a little gram-and-a-half of rainbow runtz, which was snuck in the tube of the bong with the Butterfinger.

"Well," he chuckled. "Fuckin bong stickin right out. Least they won't catch me drunk. Unlike Gordon. Cause ol Gordy is still gonna have a fun fuckin time without me, yup. Can't pick me up cause he's too lazy to get his license. Dipass."

He shut the door and didn't even bother locking the heap up, he simply turned to the trees and marched forward, little by little, searching for a clear, light path. He found the grove had a depression on the earth that ran between the hardwoods, a dried-up creek bent to the right, towards whatever. He trailed this monorail, looking up and back at the earth, taking note at how barren the

sky had become and how the world around his shoes had filled with infinite shades of green and yellow and orange and red. An odd disassociation came over as he reveled in how the trees had looked so full from a distance and in their combined force, but were individually down to their last when he stared up at them.

"I suppose even the trees only have it good *half* the time," he thought aloud, amusing himself, "I mean, they spend half the year *dead*, I wish I could do that!" And at this, his amusement was so great that he let out a singular, curt cackle.

He saw a squirrel pawing at the base of a tree not five yards away from him, but when he knelt down the squirrel ratcheted its head towards him for a glance before it was lost in a gray blur, dashing further into the depths of the forest. Doug remained kneeling, feeling how a light autumn breeze sailed over his face and against his coat. He nodded when he stood and said, with the first signs of a smile working up the corners of his lips and dissipating, "Nice and crisp."

The sun was slowly being revealed by a mass of cloud that moved further and further east, bringing gloom to those damn Whisky-onsinites, as his father had labeled them. "US binge-drinking champs," Doug joked with the old phantom, four years gone from the earth. "If you want to commit suicide, just drive down a Wisconsin county road. Some good Samaritan is bound to come and total your shit."

That made him laugh; a good, long, beating of the drum which ceased with a wipe of the lips. The sun came down practically on the top of his head, hitting the brown cap and warming his blonde scalp and subsequently his whole body. "And I'm not even high! God bless nature, I fuckin guess."

He stopped again and stood in the rays, thinking about it all. "Wish I could have more shit happen to me like . . . well, this," he motioned at the trunks about him, "and it wasn't the Let's-All-Shit-on-Doug Show the other ninety fuckin percent. Be a real help." And he stood there long enough to appreciate his little ten-percent-of-his-whole-life joy before moving on, opening the water bottle, and taking a sip.

It always blew him away how much he could love a specific *water*, a poor fuck like him turned water snob. He took another drink, capped the liter, and held his last sip in his cheeks, letting it seep slowly down his throat. He wondered if that was fucking strange to do but decided it was damn refreshing and anyone who didn't know this trick was probably one sorry, thirsty bastard.

"As for me, I'm just a sorry bastard, no question, but at least I ain't thirsty. The girl I loved is in Bar . . . Barc . . . Barstoolonia? That's the city? Bar-sell-onia? Ona? Who the hell cares? Ah, but I do! I fuckin care, my dumb ass. But at least I ain't thirsty, eh? All about the little things. God, what a generic Hallmark card thing to say: all about the little things. Sure, they might make you happy, but when the whole rest of your world is shit . . ." he threw up his hand and shook his head and scoffed.

Another quarter-mile and he swore he could hear the rumbling of a semi, and he remembered there had never been a road between the one he'd just come from and the shores of the Mississippi, which he thought was still five miles out. When he pushed up, he found a simple two-wire fence had been set up, and beyond that he saw a veil of trees and open sky beyond them.

"Did a fuckin war go on here, what the hell?" he wondered, lifting one wire and stepping on the other to get himself through. He didn't realize until he was on the other side that the thing might

have been an electric fence, and he entertained the image of him doing a little shocky-dance as God knew how many volts raced through his body to his heart.

What was more amusing though, was what was going on on the other side of the reddened trees. He crept forward, the earth beneath his feet cool and uneven, and he saw the large hole in the earth that had sprung up here. He watched the hole—perhaps a whole acre in size—and saw there were no figures below. He looked down and gauged the slope somewhere between eighty and ninety degrees, a feat that wasn't impossible, just a pain in the ass. He began to creep down with one arm—the other holding the bong, Butterfinger, and weed in his pocket—and shifted his feet back-and-forth as he cascaded down, jarring thousands of little rocks and pebbles from their resting places and sending them down before him. He didn't bother to even look at what was ahead of him as he did this, but the sky. Twilight was coming down upon them. The clouds had taken a pinkish hue and the sky was deepening to a royal violet.

"Goddamn if that isn't pretty," he said, placing both feet on solid ground and making a beeline for the tallest mound, a perfect plateau crafted not by god but by machine, sat in the middle of the pit. "Tall fuck," he called it, taking another swig of his water, unaware of the small grin that had popped between his concave cheeks.

He made his way up the mound not without struggle, kicking his feet into the dirt at every point to ensure he wouldn't slip and be rushed back to square one. When he was halfway up, he lay nearly upright, gazing out back at the wood, the green and yellow and orange and red into forever slowly being consumed by black. He wiped the sweat off his forehead, turned around, and kept going, slowly, and he sat himself atop the mound, coughing slightly. He looked around and found that while the top wasn't exactly flush with the natural level of the ground, it came pretty damn close, so much so that if he stood, he could see clear around all sides.

The top of the mound was pleasantly flat, and he laid out all his tools. He put fresh water in the bong, joking, "I forgot, do I have to pray over this damn thing to make it hit? Get favor with the Jay-Cee? So I can smoke that Jane, see? Fuck you, that was dumb."

He found that in the little baggie most of the bud had been crushed up into manageable chunks, and he realized that his left hand had been on the inside of his pocket practically the whole time, kneading the baggie and breaking it up. At this point, all he did was dig around with his pinkie for seeds and stems—of the latter he only found one—and pack a nice, full hit. For a moment, he was pissed that he didn't have any ice to put in, make the hit smoother, but he slowly came to the realization that he didn't *really* care. Most of the shit that happened to him, anyway, did he *really* care?

"I guess I don't care about my car getting hit," he said. "Yeah, I got fired, but I was gonna quit anyway, so it's not that big of a deal. And running out of gas . . ." he looked back in the direction he had come, "that's easily fixable, I suppose. Got a gas can in the damn trunk—I hope."

So, what *did* he care about? He spent so much time not caring anymore that the things he did give a flying fuck about were all collecting dust in his respective memory.

"Welp," he began, "Gordon's cat. Mista Whiska. Good boy. Doesn't fuck with me, like most cats do. Mom is still cool, she just always works. Fuckin . . ." he racked his brain and cast his eyes to the sand and said, "Butterfinger bars, SmartWater, and ganj. I care about these, that's for sure. Shit, these are my 'little things', if you wanna be a fuckin sop and think of it that way. Not in the whole

sappy, ‘Oh, the little things are all you got!’ way but in the ‘They get me by to the big things’ way, y’know?” A pause as he kept packing the bowl. “Yeah, y’know.”

He wiped his nose and realized he hadn’t laid out his trusty red Bic, and he shook his head at himself. “Forgot to put out my best piece of china! The red rocket!” He searched in his right coat pocket, nope, his left, nope, and his heart took a little skip. His right front pocket on his jeans, nope, the left front with only lint to spare. His adrenaline was steadily rising, and he lifted his ass up to pat at his back pockets, both of which were flat.

Instead of it all boiling over in an ugly meltdown—of which he’d had many—he just cleared his throat, coughed, and set the bong aside, bringing his Butterfinger and SmartWater closer to him. He unwrapped the golden wrapper, feeling like Charlie in his favorite goddamn chocolate factory, and took a crunchy bite, revealing the gold buried beneath the chocolate. He nodded at it, exclaiming, “Fucking hell, this might be the best thing I’ve ever eaten! Jesus!”

He sat there for a long while, even after the candy bar had been atomized and the water was running dry, and enjoyed his little things, and he found that maybe it wasn’t all horseshit bullshit let’s-shit-on-Doug, and that these little things could be big things in themselves, too. As a boy, he remembered his dad telling him, as he now quoted in that same, scratchy voice he’d once known, “Ya gotta appreciate what ya got, cause if ya don’t, ya got *nothin*.” And somewhere he’d forgotten that, just like how he forgot the man himself at times. But it was when the little things—like candy, weed, and bottled water—became all the world that he remembered many things, and he felt that one of those was an appreciation for the world, no matter how much it abused him.

“And the stars,” he said, “are billions of little things, and I love all of em.”

THE END