

WE'LL LEAVE THE LIGHT ON

<>story: Brian Ames © 2002

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From the moment he spoke with the desk clerk, Revo knew there could be trouble.

“You got non-smoking rooms?”

“Buddy, I think you’re mistaking us for one a them big-city motels,” the clerk said. “We don’t care what folks do in the rooms.”

Revo opened his wallet, dropped a couple of twenties on the counter. It had been a long haul, from Crescent City to Kalama, northern California through Oregon and over the Washington line an hour ago. Dusk had dropped in at Salem, his wipers throwing fat rain through Portland. He’d been on the road for eleven hours - not as long as some stretches go - but with the rain and traffic, and drowsiness setting in, he’d had enough. After the third time he snapped awake at the wheel, he decided any roadside inn would do.

“You gotta credit card?” the clerk asked. “Need a damage deposit.”

Revo looked around the the motel’s office. He stood on a worn-through rug. A single, shadeless lamp cast light across the burn-pocked desk. There was a National Hot Rod Association calendar on the wall behind the clerk.

“What am I gonna damage?”

The clerk offered a sneer. “Don’t know, but that’s the policy.”

Revo offered his card, waited while the clerk made an imprint. The boy moved slowly, as if life along Interstate 5 were so boring any diversion, even a motel guest, must be savored.

“O.K., you’re all set.” The clerk turned to pull a key from a batch of them hanging from pegs, fumbled with its fob, read the number. “You’re in lucky number three,” he said. “There’s only five rooms - it’s the one in the middle.”

“Thanks.” Revo took the key and turned for the door.

He parked his rig in the lot aside the office. Then he rummaged for his small suitcase, which he had stowed behind the seat, locked the cab, climbed down with the case. He walked across the small lot. The five rooms were separate from the office, set off and tucked back against trees and a bluff, in a long, flat structure. He passed numbers one and two, stood at the door to number three. He sighed. Someday he'd be able to afford a sleeper rig. For now, unless he wanted to supplement coffee with amphetamines, it would be seedy motel after seedy motel.

He fumbled for the key in his pocket, thought of all these travelers' rests that sprout on the landscape like mushrooms across America and Canada. He'd driven the truck across more than half the states, and nearly all the provinces. He'd slept in a thousand of these dumps, it seemed. Some were better than others, but none of them was what he would have called pleasant. And the more he stood there, key in hand, the less confidence he had in this place. He looked around - there weren't any cars in front of the other rooms, no light behind curtains. All of the porchlamps were out, burnt up probably. A single sodium flood on a pole at the center of the lot, plus the inn's neon vacancy sign, cast the only light. The vacancy sign hummed.

He keyed the lock, twisted it, heard the tumblers roll and engage. Revo pushed the door open, stepped inside.

The room smelled unused, mildewy. He groped with his free hand for a light switch, found it. A lamp next to a twin-sized bed clicked on.

"Good grief," he said.

The room was tiny, maybe ten by twelve feet. Barely more than a mattress and worn coverlet, the bed at the center of the room sagged in the middle. There was a combination desk and bureau. An open door led, he assumed, to the toilet, sink and shower. He looked back at the window. An AC unit hung on the sill, half in, half out. It appeared as if it might tumble from the room any moment. On the desk were a black rotary-dial telephone, an ashtray and another lamp. The wastecan next to the desk brimmed with dry refuse.

He stepped inside, set down his suitcase. The rug was patched in places with silver duct tape, threadbare in the high-traffic spots. There were ash burns on it, on the bedspread as well. Revo pursed his lips. There was no way he was getting into *that* bed unclothed. He imagined the sheets, decided he'd just lay on the top - but where the hell was the pillow?

Revo stepped again, heard floorboards creak. He picked up the suitcase, tossed it on the bed. Paused to take a look at the single ornamental feature

of the room - a mean little print, framed in unfinished wood, over the bedstead. It was a riverscape - could have been any river anywhere. He chose to interpret it as a picture of a bend in the Columbia, which flowed outside his room two-hundred yards away across the Interstate.

He moved toward the bathroom. He'd been holding the urge to piss for fifty miles or more. All that coffee - it had little effect on his ability to stay awake, but it sure affected his bladder.

He toggled the light in the bathroom. A bare bulb like the one in the front office washed light over the dirty sink. He looked in the filmy mirror, listened to the faucet drip. A towel that at one time had been white was folded on top of the toilet tank. He lifted the lid to the toilet, relieved himself.

A moth flitted past his head to collide and re-collide with the bulb.

He flushed, buttoned his fly. Looked around at more of the bathroom. There was untended garbage in the wastebasket here as well, a beer can, an empty pint of tequila. Wadded up toilet paper. He turned to the shower closet, noted the streaked plastic curtain. Pulled it to one side and saw what he thought were the abdomen and back legs of a bug disappearing into the rusty drain. There was a half-melted bar of soap waiting on a shelf. A thick hair clung to it, half interred like some rude, wiry fossil.

Revo turned and discovered the pillow for the bed. It had been stuffed into the confines of a towel bracket. It came away in his hands like a release of gas. Motes of dust whirled in its wake, and they spun and gathered until he clicked off the bathroom light.

He remembered he should call Nancy. He should advise his wife, waiting back in Boise, of his progress. Pulling his wallet out to retrieve a calling card, he stepped back into the tiny room for the telephone. Threw the pillow over onto the bed. At the desk, he lifted the handset to his ear, but heard dead air. Revo clicked the cradle-pins, anticipated engagement of the line, a welcoming dial tone. But again he encountered silence. The line was dead. Then he noticed a note on a card resting next to the phone: "Our lines are out. Come use the phone in the front office. - *Mgmt.*"

He grabbed the room key and stepped to the front door, spun the lock knob and fished the security chain from its portal. He pushed the door open, breathed in breeze-borne river air, took a half step outside and peered in the direction of the office. The light inside was off.

"Shit," he said, looking around, wondering whether he should go over and find the clerk. Probably the boy had gone home - it was after eleven -

although it had only been a few minutes since Revo had arrived. He heard vehicles swishing by on the Interstate, small cars and the diesel roar of trucks in overdrive. The floodlight cast a shadow behind him, in through the half-open doorway. The yellow vacancy sign cast a second, subservient shadow on the door, a weird double-exposure of conflicted light. Revo regretted, once again, that he'd yet to purchase a cellular phone. Nancy would be worried, and he wondered whether he should fire up the rig and drive to a payphone. On the other hand, she probably was already asleep.

He decided he would rise early and drive away at dawn. He would call her then. Revo returned inside the room. He locked the door behind him, re-engaged the chain.

He lay down on the mattress. He could feel his clothes bunching up on him, a day's worth of road grime on his skin. He couldn't fathom navigating the filthy shower tonight, that bar of soap on his body, that wiry hair. Revo thought of the plastic shower curtain dragging across his wet calves, the cloying greasiness of it against his skin. He shuddered. He might take a shower in the morning when it was light. After some rest, it seemed at least marginally possible he might step, nude, into that slimy place. At least, then, he'd be able to see what he was dealing with.

Revo reached for the pillow, tucked it under him. Odors of heads that had preceded his rose from it like pulpy secrets. He reached for the bedside lamp, discovered it had no cord, that he would have to rise again to toggle the light switch next to the door. Just as well, he thought - he'd forgotten to set his travel alarm. There was no clock in the room, and no way to leave a wake-up call.

He lifted himself out of the sagging bed, picked up his suitcase, rummaged through his clothes for the clock. Found it and punched buttons on its face for five-thirty. He flipped the switch; darkness dropped like a compression brake. Through air like ink, he used each step back toward the bed to evaluate his nearness to the mattress and avoid stumbling. *There it is, there.* He lay down again and turned onto his back, closed his eyes, opened them again.

Revo's vision adjusted quickly. Light bled across the thin curtains of the window. From this angle, he could barely discern the vacancy sign, blurry through the drapes. Its wan light washed him in weak yellow.

Revo shut his eyes again. But the exhaustion that had so beset him on the road evaded him now. His hands rested on the bedspread. He could feel pills and grit on the fabric with his fingertips. His head began to revolve with unlinked thoughts. He recognized that he was generally

anxious, over nothing really. Weather might make him late on tomorrow's run to Bellingham. Nancy probably was awake, waiting for him to check in. She would want to tell him about the latest bills, where they were going to come up short. Same shit, different day. And this room - *what is it with this room?*

Traffic sounds from I-5 wafted through the AC unit's grate. Light from the pole and the vacancy sign leached through the drapes. The river print brooded over the bed.

Disquietude began to creep onto him. Revo could feel his flesh pulsing, pushing beneath the skin. He no longer was even slightly drowsy. He turned onto one side to see whether he could find a more comfortable position. Just relax, he told himself. *Relax*. But it was not possible. He tossed one way and another, changing sides, onto his back, onto his belly. Odors from the pillow engulfed him. He rotated again, speculating about the room. He heard an intermittent *plink* from the bathroom door, the loose faucet. *Plink* - there it was again, and he saw the corroded fixture, the droplet fall slowly, forever, then splash on a greenish-blue stain that surrounded the drainhole like a moldy corona. He heard little clicks, bugs he thought, their feet skittering across the scraped linoleum in the bathroom. Their exoskeletons clacked against shot bedsprings under him.

The air around him morphed unexpectedly red - it was suddenly as if he were in a photographic darkroom. Through this minor confusion, he glanced at the curtains, saw the light of the vacancy sign had been overcome. A red *NO* glared there now. He imagined a blood ruby dominating the flow of light, the overtone of the room. But he hadn't heard any more cars arrive, no people get out, no slamming doors. And the office had been closed, the clerk gone, when he had looked outside.

His clothing clung to him. Despite the sweat, Revo grew cold from the inside. He sensed the first loss of underpinning, a slow unknotting of his thoughts. Revo's mind was in overdrive, *unhinging*. He sought self-solace, a calming applied to himself from within himself.

But it wasn't working, this sort of dark-night pep talk - he began conjecture: were there bloodstains under the carpet? He could imagine "*Mgmt.*" scouring the bathroom, wiping blood with tarnished towels from failing grout around the commode, the rotting caulk snaking the shower closet. He wondered whether the room had been painted over, spatters occluded with new color. He began to smell blood, other fluids. He heard sounds through the walls, the movement of rodents or bugs. Thumps and creaks emanated from the next units to either side, infrequently at first, but gaining moment and rhythm.

Revo reached for the alarm, sensed the thick air separate and clot as his hand passed through. Its resistance was like moving limbs through floodwater. He brought the clock close, read 2:03.

He had to piss again. But like a child frightened by things that are surely there waiting in the dark, he feared rising from the bed, resisted the notion of walking through this place. *This is ridiculous*, his mind said. At the same instant it told him, *No, this is real*.

Revo knew a horrible thing had happened here. A murder or suicide. Or perhaps an abduction and rape. Some kind of experiment or sacrament involving the flow of blood, buckets of it. He struggled against the baldness of this impression, wanted to laugh in the darkness at its absurdness. Wanted his laughter to drown the dripping of water, the clacking of insects. Like an animal in a snare, the harder he struggled, the more inexorably became his entanglement. A web of dark speculation spun itself around his mind. If he could summon the courage to rise from the bed, he could flee before the spider arrived - because *this* spider would be one horrifically large bad-assed arachnid. He imagined its giant mandible opening and closing.

Pinpricks of sour panic rose across him. "Jesus," he said, through a terror that was rising, and it was an honest call, not an outburst of cursing. "I'm outta here."

From very deep, Revo summoned steel courage and threw off his fear. He rose like a bullet, grabbed the suitcase. *Where's that key, where's that key?* He scrabbled in the red dark. *There!* On the edge of the desk.

But leaping up in the dark had temporarily retarded his motor skills. He reached for the key, but unable to clasp with fingers that fled just in front of terror, he clawed the fob off the desk into the wastebasket. He bent and reached into the maw of the basket to fish for the key.

Something bit his finger - the sting poked him with startling, flat coolness. His hand shot out, body recoiling. *What the fuck?* It was like there was a wasp down there, the ice in his wounded finger rising like mercury, quickly, to heat and flow. He held it up in the dark, could see drops spilling from the fingertip. Maybe it was an old razor blade in there - he wondered how current was his tetanus vaccine.

He reached blindly for the desk lamp, found the chain with his free hand. Fumbled for the knob, jerked light into being. His finger was bleeding profusely, dripping down to his palm as he held it there. He resisted the urge to put it in his mouth, to lick blood away and begin the

salving process. Revo staggered to the bathroom, ripped toilet tissue from its coil. Wrapped the tissue around the wound in a make-shift bandage. He returned to the desk, to the wastebasket, peered into its contents as if he were expecting sharp teeth to snap and spray foam.

A syringe nested there, like a venomous baby bird, among discarded paper and rubber tubing.

Revo's asshole puckered. *Drugs* - there must have been an overdose, *that's* what's with this room. And he could see it - a man with another man in his arms, the second man's head cradled and far away, nodding. The spike is still in his arm, has fed smack into him, but way too much. And the first man is crying *No, no* while the second man is saturated with the poison. The rubber tubes dangle unflexed, having released the heroin like a warm killing flood. The dying man's heart pops like a dropped egg.

Now Revo shares a needle. And the idea of this - that the same needle that had punctured the skin and pumped evil fuel into the dead man had piled into his own flesh - swelled before him like a fabulous chimera. AIDS. Hepatitis. Dried blood. White powder. Four horsemen harried forth the bloated specter of the dead junkie from the print, dragging river weed and balmy moisture (the weeping companion had dumped the body, still warm and smack-saturated, in the river) into the room.

"Oh Jesus God," Revo moaned. "Oh Jesus God."

Revo fled without his clock and suitcase. *Screw the damage deposit. Let them mark whatever they want on it.*

As he plowed out of the lot, gears of the big Kenworth grabbing, he wrought jerking compliance from that big clutch pedal and saw through the rear-view mirror the pulsing red of the NO superimposed on the vacancy sign.

As Revo sped away, toilet paper still bunched around his finger, the roar of his truck faded. Stillness fell on the roadside inn. The NO blinked out. The vacancy sign cast neon yellow on the half-open door to lucky number three.

The whole place bathed in the color of jaundice.

The End