

MARK HOWARD

Neon Smile

The road ahead was familiar, this scenery which had been his constant companion for the last 80 miles or so, a long straight road surrounded by inanimate desert, save for the occasional tumbleweed charting its aimless, rolling path. Occasionally a car, truck or motorcycle would pass in the opposite direction, and these occasional variations of imagery were welcomed. There is only so much time a painting or still photograph can command the attention, and this desert scene was tantamount to staring at a picture or a still for an hour plus. This part of Route 50 which cuts a path through the Nevada desert wasn't known as 'The Loneliest Road in America' without good cause, and it certainly wasn't *'affectionately* known as'! At least he had the radio for company, and he joined the velvet tones of Al Green in a duet as he continued on this relentless road. He had stopped at a gas station and filled the tank at the beginning of his journey, negating the need to stop again for some time.

Theo Reed, the perspiration changing the hue of his shirt, and his wet back sticking to the leather upholstery, decided the time was right to stretch his legs and relieve himself. He indicated and pulled to the dusty lay-by, and instantly cursed himself for bothering to indicate, out of a sense of stupidity since the road was his own, without sight or sound of another vehicle; indeed he hadn't seen another driver for twenty minutes or more. He climbed from the cockpit and arched his back, an aching radiated across his shoulders. Reed removed his Ray Bans, and promptly decided it hadn't been such a wise move as the glare half-blinded him, and he perched

them back on his face. He shuffled off roadside, unzipped his fly and moistened the parched earth in front of his sneakers.

Moments later, almost on cue, an RV approached and Reed, anxious that watching children may be aboard, hurriedly zipped up and returned to the side of the dust-laden Lincoln. The RV passed, with just a driver on board, and Reed was once again alone as the only other vehicle for miles shrank, became a dot and then vanished beyond the horizon. There was a cool box in the trunk with cold water, he took a bottle and gulped this down greedily—his mother would scold him for doing so had she been present, even now in his thirty-third year. Reed smiled at the thought—it was too hot to concern himself with family protocol, and he took another lengthy swig from the bottle of nature's nectar, chilling his gullet a little on the way down.

Reed's journey had been planned for months; dad's sixtieth birthday would be marked by a party. It wasn't quite a surprise but the Reeds' only son would be using the opportunity to take a holiday with his nearest kin; he hadn't visited in nearly two years. Running a busy music production company in Sacramento was beyond a full time occupation; the industry was competitive and immersing himself in work 24/7 kept him a step ahead of the competition. "You're looking a paler shade of death, that trip couldn't come soon enough," declared Lola Hernandez, his P.A., general dogsbody and surrogate parent. The reflection in the window staring back at him confirmed dear Lola's description, and hastened the need to consider a little time out.

"The stability of this company is in your capable hands for the next eight days. No pressure," Reed suggested wryly. He was reassured all the same in leaving her to hold the fort—'the pulse of this operation' he surmised.

Fast forward to the following afternoon and Reed was back in the driver's seat, a three-quarters empty bottle of water in hand. The asphalt temptress beckoned and he obliged, engaging once again with the machinery at his behest. Reed was no speed demon; he preferred to show his vehicle a little respect, keeping the pace at a steady fifty—keen to prolong the life of his mechanical steed. A mountain range approached; he hadn't any notion of its name, nor

was he so inclined to know; he was just relieved to take in a different view for a time. Reed and the gun metal grey Lincoln continued their relentless path, interrupted only by a chorus of grumbles and groans from the recesses of his abdomen. He had left home without sustenance and his digestive tract issued a reminder. Another half an hour passed before he spotted a sign: 'Diner, two miles ahead'. He would stop by for an hour and silence the protests beneath his shirt.

"Afternoon sir, what'll it be today?" asked Wendy (the label on her chest removed the necessity to volunteer her name). "A steak and salad, and a soda with plenty of ice, steak well done, please."

The diner was around 85% empty. A couple of cowboys sat at the counter downing cold beers and a family half a dozen tables away were in the death throes of their meal. The transaction between waiter and customer was brief, and fifteen minutes later Reed's order arrived. "How far is the nearest motel?" asked Reed whilst he still had a captive audience. He needed a rest, the car needed a rest, and the journey would enter a second day.

"Hmmm." Wendy searched heavenward for the answer. After a pause of twentyish seconds, she replied back, "Another 95 miles in a straight line." It was 16.30, another hour at the diner and it would be 17.30—'19.30 ETA' he estimated. "Gets dark real fast in the desert," she added, "and early in a way you don't expect."

Reed was a little bemused by this last remark, wondering if Wendy moonlighted as a medium or soothsayer. The rational being in him re-emerged and he thanked the waitress before negotiating the lunch in front of him. His body was satisfied and the earlier chorus of disapproval silenced.

By now the family half a dozen tables away had left to continue their journey to who knows where, and the two men drinking beers were still at the counter drinking beers. It seems they had little else to do in this dust bowl of a place. Reed elevated himself and settled his bill before heading back to his Lincoln. A film of dust coated the windshield, and every inch of the vehicle's surface on further examination. He wiped clean the glass and fired up the engine. By now it was almost 18.15, the meal and the subsequent recovery period had been interspersed with a couple of visits to the 'can', and a few moments of shut eye here and there. "Car isn't going to drive

itself,” he suggested quietly, as he eased his foot on the gas.

The sun continued to chart its path, and was no longer the same oppressive orb high in the sky. Glare was no longer an issue, but the same view greeted Reed as he took to the road once more. The Sonoran desert offers the majestic Seguardo for company, route 50 on the other hand is barren by contrast. With the exception of the odd abandoned, rusting, ghost pick-up or two, the surrounding countryside is flat and unchanging for many miles. Reed had two hours of this to look forward to before the comfort of the motel that Wendy had briefed him about. Without clock watching he estimated the passing of time, and at circa 19.00 hours dusk began weaving its evening tapestry. Wendy had been right, it does begin to get dark early, and Reed remembered her other declaration that it ‘gets dark real fast’. Only now was his awareness of the wildlife stimulated. The desert casts a different complexion at night as the nocturnal insect life sings its persistent, monotone chorus, joined intermittently by the lamenting, painful howling of coyotes.

‘Another hour plus to my pit stop,’ he pondered. Before he had fully ingested the thought, Reed noticed ahead a shimmer before the horizon—though shimmers were commonplace in the desert, heat ripples or mirages being the more habitual definitions of such. However, in the fading light the illusion ahead of him was unlikely to be either of these phenomena. “A town?” he wondered, and stopped for a moment roadside. The scene was unclear, a little like painting a grey square on a slightly less grey background—visible but barely so. Reed had a map, a very basic map with no signs to tell one where diners, gas stations or motels were situated en route, but towns and villages, as infrequent as they were, appeared along the very protracted line that represented route 50. This town didn’t feature.

Reed scratched his head. ‘An abandoned town—a ghost town maybe?’ he mused.

He had read about ghost towns, remnants of the Old West, but most of these still found their way onto maps, even the newer maps. The light continued to fade and he cast a glance in the direction of the ‘town’. By now its lines were becoming less blurred against the background, and this was no abandoned outcrop of the Old West,

the buildings were comparatively modern and the flicker of neon lights began to illuminate the air. Now lit, the town stood distinct amidst the backdrop of the desert. The desert itself had become the shimmer; beyond the town resided an ever darkening screen which promised to turn bitumen black, and Reed didn't relish another hour of driving through this terrain, especially not under a cloak of darkness.

The Lincoln trundled slowly, almost cautiously into the town. This was no Vegas but it was lively and stood out like an oasis of light. The neon signs mapped the town, the hotels, bars, restaurants, and the casino of course. Perhaps this was a mini Vegas after all! Reed passed two blocks and settled on a hotel with an inviting facade, adorned as it was with potted palm trees and a suggestion of cold beer inside. Outside the 'Sunnee Grande Hotel' there was ample parking space. Reed noted in fact that the street was almost bereft of cars besides his own. Unfazed, he lifted his case from the trunk and vaulted the two steps into the waiting reception area.

He was greeted by a smiling, uniformed woman, 'Stacey Jones', attractive and in her early 40s (he estimated). They exchanged formalities and she instructed Reed about the terms and conditions. "Check-out is at 6.30 a.m. sir, not a minute later," she added, in a friendly rather than authoritarian manner.

"That's very early. May I ask why?" asked the bemused customer.

"It's just hotel policy, Mr. Reed. I can arrange an early morning call to your room if you wish."

Reed wasn't about to cede so easily. "Are there hotels here that check out later, like at 10.00?"

She smiled again, and without hesitating added, "Every hotel in Sunnee has a strict one night only and 6.30 checkout policy, by order of the mayor's office."

He countered: "And one night only?!" He didn't venture to pursue a further line of questioning about the 'one night issue', and admitted defeat. "Fine, no problem," he replied, slightly miffed, and took the key card from his host. Smiling, he signed off with a conciliatory remark, "Sunnee huh? Great name for a town." She thanked him, and directed him to 'room 16—first floor'.

After dropping off his bag, freshening up and a change of clothes,

Reed returned to the lobby and was pointed in the direction of the hotel restaurant. The steak he'd eaten earlier still resided in some form in his stomach, so he opted for a light dinner of Cajun prawns and rice with corn, washed down with a cold beer. He scanned his surroundings. There was a lively clientele; dinner was evidently as much a social event as for fuel. The couple at the next table shared pleasantries and introduced themselves. "Hi, we're Terri and Michael Flanagan."

"Theo Reed. You guys staying here too?"

"Hell no," chuckled Terri. "We're locals, always lived in this town, even married here." The couple peered at one another and beamed.

"Sunnee by name, sunny by nature," suggested the visitor, and they nodded in agreement. More conversation followed, dinner was consumed, thereafter which, Reed bade the Flanagans a good evening and headed out to the street.

Across the road a neon sign lured him to 'Gerry's Bar'. The place was heavily populated inside, and a band played live music, a fusion of country and folk, a little like Neil Young. It wasn't to Reed's taste; he listened to and worked with soul musicians, but the mood in the bar was warm and welcoming, and the band were instrumental to the atmosphere, pun aside. A smiling bartender approached and took his order of a regular shot of brandy—'no benders tonight', not with a 6.30 check out. Reed was relaxed, the locals were friendly, and he even found himself tapping a foot to the rhythm permeating from the stage. It took him a while to notice the looks and coy smiles in his direction. He faced them head on and noted the source of the attention.

"Hi, Tanya Hyde." Reed cupped his ear...and the attractive woman sat beside him at the bar repeated herself, raising the volume so that she could be heard above the band.

He smiled. "Isn't that a porn actress name?" he asked, stifling a laugh.

"Ha, deeha," she snapped. "Like I never heard that one before."

Reed apologised.

"Don't worry stranger, daddy had a sense of humour, couldn't help himself. The kids at school were too young to understand until late high school."

Reed offered his sympathies and closed the book on that discussion. Ms Hyde was also a Sunnee local; single and in her late twenties was his preliminary finding. She worked as an accounts clerk and shared a flat with an old friend from school. Reed shared his portfolio and they knew a little more about one another. As the evening advanced, the chemistry between them grew, imbued by alcohol and the ambience of the bar.

“When are you leaving this fine town then, Theodore.”

He smiled at the use of the version of his name which resided only on his birth certificate. “I think you know the answer already: 6.30 tomorrow.” He paused. “What is it with the one night only, 6.30 kick out rule?” The ‘kick out’ remark was a deliberate error, borne of his frustration.

“Oh, you know, old town, old rules; been that way for a hundred years or more, I’m told. The place is full of old farts who don’t appreciate change,” she added in a cynical tone.

Reed wasn’t in the habit of casual liaisons, certainly not one night stands, but was prepared to make an exception under the circumstances, as long as she was a willing party. They had another drink, talked more and then left the bar together. Feeling a little lighter-headed, and heavier legged, they linked arms and teetered towards the Sunnee Grande. “You realise this is a one-off?” whispered the lady in Reed’s ear. He turned quickly and planted a short kiss on her scarlet lips.

“Nobody I’d rather spend a one-off with,” he answered with a modicum of affection.

They passed through reception unnoticed. It was twenty minutes before midnight and the staff had clocked off for the night, or maybe they were taking a break. Reed didn’t care either way, as long as he could slip by with his guest, and without embarrassment.

Once in the room their animal instincts took over. Clothes were strewn on the floor where they undressed one another and two bodies became one in the glow of the neon signs adorning the neighbouring buildings. The silhouettes moved rhythmically with the flicker of lights, almost as if they had been synchronised as such, and the moans and sounds of pleasure were filtered out by the throng of music and laughter on the street and in the bars and

clubs that lined the boulevard. The writhing continued for the next ninety minutes before the pair slumped heavily into the mattress, exhausted, but satisfied, to coin an understatement. Reed lay awake for a time, and allowed himself a little reflection before sleep consumed him. Sunnee was a beacon in the darkness of a barren desert, and the people glowed along with the neon lights—‘the final thought for the night’.

Sleep was broken with a 6.00 a.m. call. Reed was alone, his companion leaving an impression in the pillow next to him but nothing else of note. Reed thanked the caller and proceeded to lift himself from the bed, but decided another few minutes rest wouldn’t do any harm. He was awoken by another call. The clock read 6.34, and the voice at the other end of the phone was a little more panicky this time. “You must check out now,” she declared. He rose from the bed and hurriedly began dressing, unfortunately tripping as he tried negotiating the left leg of his denims. He hit the floor with a thud, striking his temple on a bedside chair on the way down. He cursed and cussed, deciding ‘that’s gonna leave a mark’. Sitting back on the bed he felt dazed and the need to gather his senses. If he had to pay a little extra for leaving a little later then so be it. Another call arrived. “You have to get out now.” Reed obeyed, gathered his belongings and descended the stairs to the reception area.

‘Must have hit my head harder than I thought,’ he speculated as he encountered the grey, diminishing colours of the Sunnee Grande lobby. He blinked repeatedly for several seconds, the scene remained unchanged. The receptionist was barely visible against the background, and Reed concluded that he needed an aspirin to clear his head. There was no hint of the earlier desperation in her calls to him, in fact she said nothing and stared blankly beyond Reed. He apologised for checking out late (by now the clock read 6.52), but she said nothing. Reed placed the key card on the counter and in the second or two that followed he recoiled as she reached out for it.

Beneath her hand he could see the grain of the varnished pine counter, almost as if her hand wasn’t there, and as he looked back at her she had faded further. Fear gripped him and for a moment he froze. When the life returned to his limbs Reed left hurriedly for the street.

Outside, a few people, spectres perhaps being a more apt choice of description, frequented the pavements. Amidst the fading appearance, the smiling and frivolity of the night before had been replaced by a gaunt, soulless expression. Reed fumbled anxiously with his keys, dropping them in the process. He stooped to collect them from the gutter, which was fast becoming a dirt patch, stood and was greeted by the sight of a familiar face passing him. He didn't speak—Tanya Hyde had the same vacant expression as the other residents of Sunnee. The buildings, like the people, were becoming featureless. A further glance in the direction of Tanya was enough to see her fade completely, along with the bars, hotels, shops and houses of Sunnee. For a while Reed stood transfixed, apprehensive rather than afraid. All that was left was shadows, shadows of buildings and shadows of people. In the few minutes that followed, the shadows also faded and were gone. He began to understand the urgency to clear the town of visitors by 6.30.

Reed drove a hundred yards or so and stopped. He turned his head and peered back through the rear window of the Lincoln, half expecting to see the town behind him, but there was nothing but the desert. In a haze he closed his eyes for a while, perhaps seven or eight minutes, and in his thoughts he tried to make sense of it all.

'Was it all a dream?' is the obvious cliché response, but crossed his mind all the same. He craned his neck towards the rear view mirror to check for signs of a bruise to his temple. He spotted scarlet lipstick on his cheek. Reed smiled and appreciated the irony of the place called Sunnee. 'Sunnee at night and Unseen in the light of day'; the anagram made sense.