

Off the Track
a short story by David Garnett

They drove on down the road. Stretching ahead to the horizon, it was straight and empty. An hour had passed since they'd seen another vehicle;

an hour before that, they'd taken the wrong road. Michael had realised his mistake almost at once but had said nothing.

It would make little real difference.

He kept his speed down. If they went any faster, the cracks and potholes in the road shook the car too much. Not that he cared about the hired car,

but there was no hurry. They were on holiday -- or supposed to be.

"There's nothing," said Angela, as she turned the radio dial.

"Nothing."

Michael heard all kinds of different sounds fading in and out between the

crackles of interference -- news reports, advertising and sports commentary; a string quartet, a choir singing hymns and a swing band -- but Angela switched the radio off and leaned back in her seat.

He watched from the corner of his eye as she looked down at the book in her lap and turned the page. Michael couldn't believe Angela was as bored

as she pretended. She kept complaining about the heat, saying they should

have hired a car with air conditioning; but he knew she wouldn't have complained about the heat if she'd been stretched out on a beach. Her window was wound down, and the hot desert wind blew her hair back. Angela could be on the beach again in a few days when they went back,

but this was his part of the holiday, something he'd always wanted to do. He had not been disappointed. The desolate landscape and the distant

rock formations were even more spectacular than he'd imagined. He liked everything about the place; he even liked the potholed road. Driving was meant to be like this, without long queues, without being jammed solid in a city street. Back in Britain, there was nowhere he

could have driven as far without having to stop. The same was true wherever he'd

travelled in Europe.

They had driven through Holland and Germany, France and Spain and Portugal, but always in their own car. This was the first time Michael had

driven a left-hand drive vehicle, and he was surprised how soon he got used to it. Angela had refused to drive, another demonstration of her feelings about this part of the holiday.

"Town coming up," said Michael, as he saw the signpost at the side of the

road. He glanced at the fuel gauge. It was still half full, but it was best to keep the tank filled up. "Maybe we should get some petrol." Angela said nothing.

"Could do some shopping," he added.

Angela turned her head. He couldn't see her eyes because of her dark glasses.

"Shopping?" she said. "Shopping!"

Then she smiled and swiped at his shoulder.

"You English? I make you a deal!" said Michael, and Angela laughed.

"How big's this town?" she asked. "Two houses or three?"
"Horses, did you say, or houses?"
Angela kept looking at him. "You're enjoying yourself, aren't you?"
He nodded. "But you're not?"

She shrugged, then studied the silver bracelet around her wrist,
lightly
rubbing at the turquoise stone with her thumb.
"Some of it is alright," she said. "I suppose."
Even after so long together, Michael was always amazed how much Angela
could say in a few words. Almost as much as she could say with a single
look.

As far as she was concerned, they could have returned an hour after
crossing the border. By then she'd bought everything she wanted from
the

handful of tourist shops clustered on the northern side of the
frontier.

Michael had to admit that it all seemed good quality stuff, and of
course
the prices were ridiculously cheap. Tourists had only been allowed in
very

recently, and they'd had to buy their visas before they left Britain.
When it came to shopping, Angela was an expert; she could find what she
wanted almost immediately. She had bought hand-crafted jewellery and
woven

rugs to take back as gifts. Michael had restricted her to the number of
rugs they could fit in a large suitcase, but told her to buy as much
jewellery as she wished -- and not to forget herself. Angela had tried
to

persuade him to buy a pair of fancy leather boots, but Michael knew he
would never wear them. To keep her happy, he bought a snakeskin belt.
He

would never wear that, either, but at least it was less bulky and a lot
cheaper.

That had been yesterday morning, and they had spent the night in an
approved hotel. Michael had filled the fuel tank before they crossed
the

border, and again where the Volkswagen had been garaged for the night.
"If nothing else," said Angela, "perhaps we can get some lunch. Even if
they don't have petrol, they've got to eat."

"You want to risk it?"
"It can't be worse than some of the food we've eaten abroad, and it
will

be a lot cheaper. We've got to try the local cuisine while we're here."
They had enough food, a packed lunch prepared at the hotel; but maybe
Angela was finally coming to terms with this trip.

"Just don't drink the water," said Michael, as one of them always did
wherever they went. "I wouldn't even put it in the radiator."
Angela nodded, then glanced back at Michael. "Air-cooled engine,
right?"

she said. "I just wish this air would cool me." She fanned her face
with

her book, then gazed out of the windscreen as they neared the town.
They had driven through several similar small towns, and compared to
those

in Europe the roads were all very wide, even the side streets, and the
buildings were set far apart. None of them were very tall, many of them
only single storey. There was no need to build up when it was easier to
build out. If there was one thing in surplus here, it was land.

Michael wondered what possible reason there could be for a town out
here

in the wilderness. Why had it ever been settled? Which came first, the road or the town? Almost every building was built of wood. Nothing looked

new, nothing looked old. A decade or a century, it made little difference.

A swirl of dust blew across the street ahead of them, a reminder that the

desert was waiting to reclaim the whole area.

It only took a minute to reach the centre of town, and the road was lined

with shops on either side. At least half of them were boarded up or derelict. Michael saw two other vehicles going by in the opposite direction, one of them a pickup truck, the other a battered old saloon. The driver of the first stared, the driver of the second raised a hand

in greeting. Michael started to wave back, but he was too late.

He noticed two petrol pumps on the other side of the road, and he took his

foot off the accelerator.

"Is that garage open?" he asked.

"It looks deserted."

"That might not mean anything. They won't get many customers."

As he drove past, he saw the open door of what might have been a workshop.

"There!" said Angela. "Someone's inside."

"We'll give it a try."

He checked the mirror. There was nothing behind. There had been nothing behind since the border. He did a U-turn and pulled into the forecourt.

A huge black and white dog was lying in the shade on one side of the petrol

pumps. It didn't move when Michael halted on the other side.

"Got any petrol?" Michael said to the dog

It opened its eyes, then closed them again.

"Maybe it's self-service," said Angela.

"I'm not going to risk it. Are you?"

He stretched back in his seat, trying to see into the workshop. One vehicle was up on a ramp inside. There were a number of others nearby,

but all of them were on flat tyres or without wheels. In such a climate, it would take a long time for them to rust.

He heard a chatter of voices and leaned back. There were three or four children at Angela's door, their hands thrust in through the window.

Two more appeared next to him, begging.

"Ignore them," he said.

Angela opened her purse and started handing out coins.

"Alright, ignore me," muttered Michael, as the two children at his window

ran around to join the others.

He straightened his tie, opened the door and stepped out of the car.

Then he noticed a shadow on the ground, and he turned around quickly, taking

a step back when he saw the man only two yards away from him.

"Petrol?" he said. "Have you any petrol?"

The man was tall and lean, wearing an oily vest and stained denim trousers. He stared at Michael, then looked at the car. He touched the shiny new metal with his grimy fingers. When he drew back, there were

greasy fingerprints on the wheel arch. He bent down and started to wipe the paintwork with the rag he was holding. His hand became still when he

noticed Angela in the passenger seat. He stared at her for a few seconds,

then finished cleaning the dirt and stood up. He walked around car, studying it, then looked at the number plate at the front.

Michael wondered if the man had understood him. Carefully, he repeated:

"Have you any petrol?"

"Gas," Angela told him.

"Have you any gasoline?"

"Nice car," said the man.

"It's hired," Michael said quickly.

"Where you folks from?"

"England."

The man nodded slowly, then spat on the windscreen.

Michael took a deep breath and wondered how fast he could get back into the car and drive away.

Then the man leaned towards the bucket by the pumps and picked up the wash

rag. He began to clean the windscreen -- and Michael slowly exhaled.

He seemed quite old; but his face was so lined and weatherbeaten, it was

hard to be sure of his true age. His hair was still thick, although almost

totally grey.

"Out of here!" he yelled at the children, flicking water at them.

They ran off, laughing, and Angela climbed out of the Volkswagen. The man's eyes followed as she walked over towards the dog. Michael wanted

to

tell her not to touch the animal, but he knew it would make no difference.

She stroked the dog's head, and its tail began to beat lazily against the

ground, sending up clouds of dust.

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Dunno," said the man.

Angela glanced up at him.

"But I call him Duke," he added, and he smiled.

"Dook? Oh, Duke!" She laughed and rubbed at the dog's ears. "Are you a good boy, Duke? Are you? Aren't you handsome? Yes, you are. Yes, you are."

Angela was crazy about dogs. Michael had married her five years ago, and

her boxer had been the dowry. It had taken a long time for Michael to persuade her to leave the animal in kennels so they could go away for foreign holidays. These three weeks were the longest time she had ever been separated from her dog -- and this would probably be the last time Michael and Angela would be alone together for a very long time. Their first child was due in six months.

The dog rolled over onto its back, its legs in the air. The man looked at

Michael, then back at Angela.

"Yessir," he said, as he finished washing the screen, "I've got gas.

Even

got an electric pump. You got vouchers?"

Michael nodded and reached for his wallet, pulling out several petrol vouchers. They had been overprinted in red: Tourist Issue Only Federal Penalty For Illegal Use. He'd had to buy them at the border, paying in

advance for any fuel he would use. He had tried to calculate how many gallons they might need, converting imperial gallons and estimating fuel consumption, only to discover that he had to buy a minimum number of vouchers.

The same was true of the currency; both of them had exchanged travellers cheques for the minimum of twenty thousand dollars in cash. Once they returned to the frontier, they would have to surrender any dollars and fuel vouchers they had left. There were no refunds.

Michael found it strange how all American banknotes were exactly the same size and colour, whatever the denomination. Inflation was finally down to under a hundred percent a year, however, and before too long the currency must surely be revalued to reflect its relative stability.

"Okay," said the man. "You want it full?"

"Please."

He unscrewed the fuel cap, unhooked the hose from one of the pumps and slid the nozzle into the filler. Setting the trigger onto automatic, he walked to the rear of the car.

"England, huh?" he said. "I spent an hour in Scotland once. The plane was refuelling." He opened the back of the Volkswagen. "But I spent much longer in Germany." He pulled out the dipstick, wiped it with a cloth, slid it back, pulled it out again, nodded.

"They make these in Mexico now," said Michael.

"I know."

"That's where we hired this."

"I know." He closed up the engine. "They're beginning to build cars in American again, I hear."

He turned to face Michael, looking him directly in the eye for the first time.

Michael felt he had to say something. "Were you on holiday in Germany?" he asked.

"In the army. I was conscripted in 'fifty-eight. Korea was over, and the only war they had was the cold one. Ten years later, and I'd probably be dead."

This time Michael could think of nothing to say.

The man shrugged. "It's all over now, I guess. We should never have been there, should never have done what we did. But what happened to us should never have happened, either."

The fuel nozzle switched off, and the man pulled it part way out. He gently squeezed the trigger, rounding off the figures on the pump dial, then replaced the nozzle in its slot.

"How much?" Michael asked.

"Twelve hundred bucks."

Michael counted out twelve vouchers and handed them over. He ought to pay more, as a tip, but he felt guilty about doing so. If he added another voucher, it would be as if he were trying to make up for what had happened -- as though it were his personal responsibility. He wondered if he

should

give the man a hundred dollars for washing the windscreen, and he opened

the other part of his wallet.

The man realised what Michael was doing, and he shook his head. "That's okay," he said, and he turned to look at Angela. The dog was licking

the

back of her hand.

"Angela," said Michael, "we'd better leave."

there

"We've got to go now, Duke," she told the dog, and she stood up. "Is

Hot,

anywhere we can get a cup of tea?" she asked the man. "A proper cup.

some

with milk and sugar."

"A cup of tea?" He smiled. "No, ma'am, I doubt it. But I've just made

coffee, and you're welcome to a cup."

"We'd better leave," Michael reminded her.

"That's very kind of you," she said. "We'd love a cup of coffee."

"Come on through into the house." The man turned and walked away.

"Angela," said Michael, waving her towards the car.

"Michael," said Angela, and she gestured towards the service station.

She

began following the man.

Michael drummed his fingers on the roof of the car for a few seconds, wound up the windows and locked the doors. He quickly combed his hair, then followed Angela. They went around the back of the garage. A one storey clapboard house stood there, surrounded by even more derelict

cars

and trucks.

"Come on in," said the man. "You'll have to excuse the mess, but I'm packing up. I'll soon be gone."

"Where are you going?" asked Angela, as she followed him through to the kitchen. A pot of coffee was simmering on the stove.

time

"Tennessee. Always said I'd go back there some day. Now's as good a

as any."

"Were you born there?"

"No, born in Mississippi. My folks moved to Tennessee when I was thirteen.

Here, take a seat." He lifted a pile of magazines from a chair, and Angela

sat down.

Despite his annoyance, Michael found himself fascinated by what little the

man had said. Tennessee. Mississippi. They had always seemed to be names

from some ancient myth, but meeting someone who had lived there was almost

like becoming part of the legend.

"Ever since I was a child," said Michael, "I've always wanted to visit the

U.S.A."

"Uh-huh."

Michael's abiding images of America had been of Westerns, the exotic landscapes of prairies and deserts, of mesas and buttes -- which was exactly what he'd discovered in Arizona.

"How long have you been here?"

"About ten years. After the army, I moved to Texas to work in the oil industry." He laughed for a moment, but there was no humour in his

voice.

"When we had an oil industry."

Texas, thought Michael, another evocative name.

"But you weren't there when...when..."

"No. I was up in Colorado on a fishing vacation with some buddies.

Lucky,

I guess." He was standing by the sink, washing out tin mugs. "You folks got any kids?"

must

Angela and Michael glanced at each other, both knowing what the man

have been remembering.

"Not yet," said Angela. She licked her lips. "You?"

"Two, a boy and a girl. Their momma and me, we split up. She took them with her to California." He paused. "Los Angeles."

When there was a Los Angeles, thought Michael, but he remained silent.

So

did Angela. The man poured them both a cup of coffee, boiling hot and

very

strong.

"I'm working on my truck right now," he said. "Soon as everything's

ready,

Duke and I are gone."

"Will you be able to carry all your belongings?" asked Angela.

"All I need. What I can't carry, I'll leave or try to sell. You

interested

in buying anything?"

The man was smiling, but he meant what he said.

"Thank you, but I don't think so," said Michael.

"What have you got?" said Angela.

"All kinds of junk," said the man.

"Authentic American souvenirs, you mean," she told him.

"Exactly. You're welcome to take a look around."

Angela's eyes widened. "What's for sale?" she asked.

"Everything. Even Duke."

She looked at him sharply.

"Except Duke," he amended.

Michael knew he couldn't win. He sipped at his coffee -- and he didn't like that, either.

Angela gazed around the kitchen, at the old crockery and the dented

pots,

but Michael was certain there was nothing here that she wanted. Even if there were, he would throw it out as soon as she wasn't looking. He

didn't

want any of this stuff in his house, and Angela certainly couldn't give any of it as presents.

"We can't take anything bulky," he told her. "It's only a small car, remember. And we have to think of our luggage allowance on the flight."

"Take your time." Somehow the man had managed to finish his scalding coffee. "I'll be out front if there's anything you find." He left the kitchen.

"Angela," said Michael, "you can't be serious. There's nothing here you can possibly want."

"Probably not, but I want to look around. Give me your wallet."

Michael did as he was asked. "Hurry up," he said.

He poured his coffee down the sink and picked up one of the magazines

from

the stack on the floor. It was a motoring magazine, quarter of a

century

old. He wondered if they were worth much. Even if they were, they were

too

heavy to take back to Britain.
It was too hot to remain in the room, and Michael let the magazine fall back, then left the kitchen. He turned right into the hallway. There was another door at the end, and he pushed it open.
The room was filled with junk, real junk, all kinds of obsolete household electrical equipment, most of it dusty and dismantled. There was a pile of old paperbacks on top of a doorless refrigerator. Michael picked up a few and glanced at the covers. They were all Westerns. He put them back, but the top one fell to the floor. Bending down to retrieve it, he saw something narrow wedged between a vacuum cleaner and the blade of a broken fan. He didn't recognise the object, so he pulled it free. It was only an old record, he realised, as he brushed the dust from his sleeve. There couldn't have been anything of value in the house. House? It was more like a shack. If there were anything, the man wouldn't have left them alone in the place. Or maybe that was the whole idea. What if he claimed Michael and Angela were trying to rob him? He probably had a gun somewhere. All Americans had guns. He might have gone for it now so he could threaten them. It was time to get out of here.
"Angela!" he yelled, and turned to leave the room. "Angela!"
The man was standing in the hallway.
"What you got there?" he asked.
"Nothing," said Michael, then he noticed he was still holding the record.
"Is that what you want?"
"Er...yes."
"What is it?"
Michael studied it for the first time. The label was visible through a circular hole in the paper cover.
"Rock around the Clock," he read. "Bill Haley and his Comets."
"Rock around the Clock!" laughed the man. "Number one in the hit parade!
Didn't know I still had that. Remember buying it in Memphis. Shit, must have been nearly forty years ago! Look, I even wrote my name on the sleeve."
"You should keep it." Michael tried to hand the record back.
The man hesitated, then shook his head. "It's no good to me. I can't play it. But it's a real piece of American history, believe you me."
"Is it? One of those, er, long-playing records, is it?"
"No, it's a seventy-eight."
"Seventy-eight what?"
"Revs per minute. Forty-fives came in soon after, if I remember right."
"Ah, yes." When Michael was younger, a couple of his friends used to buy records.
"Rock and roll! God, what that meant to us when we were young. It was our symbol of rebellion, you know what I'm saying?"
Michael said nothing.
"No," said the man, looking him up and down, "maybe you don't. Our parents

hated rock and roll, and radio stations banned it. But it was our music, and it was going to be our world. We felt everything would be different from then on." He shrugged. "But it wasn't. I guess it never is." He gazed at the record but his eyes were unfocused, and he was obviously

remembering the past.

"How much?" asked Michael, to break the silence.

"It's priceless -- and it's worthless. So take it. It's a gift."

"No, we'll pay," said Angela, suddenly appearing behind the man. "And I'd

like this, and this, and this, if they're for sale."

She'd found a small lacquered box with tiny drawers, an oval mirror with a

wicker frame and handle, and a crystal perfume spray.

"If you want them, ma'am, they're for sale."

"Five thousand dollars?"

The man stared at Angela in amazement.

"Not enough?"

"No. Yes, I mean. More than enough. Too much. They ain't worth anywhere near as much."

"They are to me."

Angela counted the notes from Michael's wallet, handing them to the man.

He tried to refuse, but Michael knew how difficult Angela was to dissuade.

"Is there anything else you want?" he asked, shaking his head in bewilderment. "Take anything." He looked at the money, and he smiled.

"Take everything."

"We must be going," Angela told him. "Thank you for the coffee."

"You're welcome, ma'am."

He held out his hand, and Angela shook it. Michael backed away out of reach.

"Come on, Michael."

They left the house and began making their way back to the Volkswagen.

"Five thousand dollars?" whispered Michael.

"You know the rate of exchange. You earn that in a day. Come on, quickly."

"What's the rush?"

"I don't want him to find those petrol vouchers until we've gone."

Michael halted. "The what! How many did you leave?"

She tugged at his arm. "We've still got plenty. We don't need them all."

"But he won't be able to use them. They're only for tourists."

"He'll find a way if he has to," said Angela. She paused to stroke the dog, which was still lying in the same place. "Give me the keys, I'll drive."

She unlocked her door and carefully put the things she had bought on the

back seat, then climbed into the car and opened the passenger door. It was

roasting inside. Michael swung his door backwards and forwards, trying to

force some cooler air into the vehicle. Angela slid the key into the ignition and started the engine. Michael sat down, closed his door and opened the window.

By then, the man was standing next to the driver's door.

"Where you heading for?" he asked.

Angela glanced at Michael.

"The Grand Canyon," he answered.

"You won't be disappointed." The man nodded.

"It's Tennessee for you?" said Angela.

"And Mississippi. I reckon it's time I visited my brother's grave again."

"He died when...er..?" Angela's voice tailed away.

"Died at birth."

Michael noticed his wife's right hand leave the steering wheel and touch her stomach.

"He was my twin brother." The man wiped his forehead with the back of his

arm. He seemed to study the town, but his gaze encompassed far more.

"Sometimes I think he was the lucky one."

He and Angela looked at each other for a moment, and he said: "Have a good

vacation, you hear?"

"We will," she said, nodding. "Goodbye."

The man waved as the car drove off into the street.

"This is America," said Michael. "They drive on the right."

The Volkswagen swerved to the other side of the road.

Angela glanced at Michael, then she grinned.

"Are you angry?" she asked.

"At giving away five thousand dollars to a complete stranger? Why should I be?"

But his anger was already ebbing away. For the first time Angela no longer

seemed to resent them being here, which was all that mattered.

They had only driven a few hundred yards when she suddenly braked and pulled the car into the side. She pointed across the road to the war memorial.

It stood in a small plot, surrounded by flowers. There was a fountain in

one corner, a flagpole in another. There were still fifty stars on the American flag.

"It's like a tombstone," said Angela, softly.

In the centre was a simple slab of white marble, with carved lettering highlighted in black.

In Memory of the One Million

When the casualty list reached that high, official figures were no longer

issued. Some said the total was one and a half million American dead, others two million.

Two million dead in Vietnam, but that was nothing compared to the number

who had died when the war suddenly reached the U.S.A. There was no memorial to them, and the death toll was even more speculative. Perhaps thirty million on the day the missiles landed, perhaps twice as many in the years that followed. And there must have been at least as many fatalities in the Soviet Union.

"Why did they go when they knew they'd be killed?" asked Angela.

"Orders. It was their duty."

"But it was all so stupid. What were they fighting for? What were they dying for? Why didn't anyone protest, try to stop the war?"

Michael didn't really know what she meant.

"They did try to stop the war," he said. "They dropped nuclear bombs on

Hanoi."

"And look what happened! They were warned not to, but they went ahead.

The

whole world could have been destroyed. A lot of it was. And for what?

For

what?"

She turned towards Michael, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Let's get out of here," he told her. "Are you alright to drive?"

"Yes." Angela nodded. "It's just...just..."

She glanced at the memorial again, shook her head, then drove off.

"What are you going to do with that stuff?" he asked, hoping to change

the

subject. "Give it to someone you don't like?"

"What?"

"The stuff you got from Jesse G. Presley."

"How do you know his name?"

Michael was still holding the record, and he showed Angela the name written on the cover.

"I'm going to keep it all," Angela said. "But what are you going to do with that?"

"Nothing. What can we do with it? Do we know anyone with a gramophone?"

He

glanced at the title again. "Rock around the Clock."

"What does that mean?"

"Who knows? Who cares?"

Michael turned and threw the record onto the back seat, watching the

town

recede in the distance. He wished they had stayed on the right road, wished they hadn't stopped. Everything had been fine until then; but

now

it was almost as if there was something missing, and he had no idea

what

it could have been.

In silence, they drove on down the road.

Completely off the Track

an afterword by David Garnett

When my first novel *Mirror in the Sky* was published, I gazed at it in admiration: it was just wonderful. I'm talking about the physical appearance of the book, of course: never in the whole history of publishing had there been such a handsome paperback. I was totally thrilled, absolutely delighted. The book looked so good, felt just

right,

it was a magnificent object.

I flicked through the pages, all those words, hundreds and hundreds to each page, thousands and thousands throughout the novel. And all of

them

my words!

There was no need to read them all, of course, because I knew the story they told. Why read a book when you know what happens?

After a while, I decided to take a look at the fictional content from

an

objective position. When you read a novel, you start with the first chapter. So I started reading the first chapter of *Mirror in the Sky*.

As a science fiction novel, it wasn't too unusual that the opening

chapter

was set on board a spaceship. But I have to admit to feeling a bit disappointed when after a few pages the word "ship" was printed as

"shop".

Every author has found typographical errors in their work. Every reader has found glitches in books and stories. Most of these are obvious, but others are harder to detect and can pass unnoticed during a fast reading.

Writers have even been known to make mistakes of their own, and when these remain uncorrected and are immortalised in print, the writer has no one else to blame except for himself/herself -- apart from the editor who should have noticed, the copy editor who should have noticed, and the proof reader who should have noticed. (The job descriptions "copy editor"

and "proof reader" are becoming as rare as blacksmith and wheelwright.) There is another category of mistake: the "improvements" and "corrections"

made by editors which are in fact worse or incorrect -- but for which the author is blamed, because whose name appears on the text?

A story or novel is never completely finished. An author can keep on revising almost forever, taking a word out one day, putting it back the next, changing it the next, then changing the change...all in the endless

quest for perfection. Even when it has been published, that doesn't mean the story is over.

The words are not sacred text, carved into tablets of stone. When a story is printed, there will inevitably be errors of some kind. A reprint offers the chance to correct those errors -- and also to give the story another polish.

But, of course, another reprint also means the chance of introducing different mistakes...

For example: I once had a story published in Interzone called "The Only One" and when it was to be reprinted in Interzone -- The Third Anthology,

I corrected the errors in the text (very few and very minor, such as the word "red" which should have been "end") and also took the opportunity to run the text through my word processor again.

When the anthology was published, my contribution contained a variety of

new errors introduced by the typesetter. The story was a Victorian scientific romance (in the style which later become known as "steampunk")

and one of the lines was "I satiated my base lusts elsewhere". In the anthology version, this became "I satiated my base lusts everywhere"! This was the hardback edition of the book. For the paperback, I

corrected all the new mistakes -- and while I was at it, I also took the opportunity

to run the text through my word processor yet again. This means that there are three versions of "The Only One" in print,

all slightly different: magazine, hardback and paperback.

The third version of "The Only One" is the definitive one. For now. There

was another new error which was added in the paperback edition, however

--

and I hope to get that corrected next time!

I wrote *Mirror in the Sky* when I was 19 and sold it to Berkley in the USA.

Then I wanted to try a British publisher, but all I had was a very poor carbon copy of the manuscript. The ink was blurred and faded, covered with the pencilled-in corrections I'd made on the top copy. Because I was too impatient to wait until the American edition appeared, I typed out the whole novel again so I could submit a legible copy to a British publisher.

In these days of "disposable manuscripts", where the cost of postage is more than that of producing the text, it's hard to realise how valuable a typed script used to be. Before word processors, every page of every draft had to be laboriously typed out. Photocopiers did exist, but in real money it cost a shilling per page. A shilling was the price of a pint (no, not milk: beer!). Using that as comparison, it would now cost a couple of quid per page -- the equivalent of £400 to photocopy a 200 page manuscript. (This was back when most sf novels were around 60,000 words.) *Mirror in the Sky* ended up with far more than just a retype, of course:

I produced a complete new draft. By then I was 20 or 21, and a far better writer than when I was a mere lad of 19... I told Berkley that I had a new, improved version of the manuscript.

Did they want it? They sent a telegram to say: Yes, I should immediately airmail the new manuscript to them, that they would pay the cost. So I mailed the revised manuscript -- and they published the first version.

When a British publisher finally made me an offer for the book, they realised they could save costs by printing from the Berkley edition. Which is what they did. The final, revised, improved version of *Mirror*

in the Sky exists only in manuscript. But at least in the British reprint the word "shop" was corrected to "ship".

And so, finally, to "Off the Track" which was first published in Interzone

#63, then reprinted in *The Best of Interzone* (1997) -- and now appears here in infinity plus.

It's an alternate world story, which has three characters: the tourists Angela and Michael, who are fictional; and the American they meet, who is real -- or was real, or would have been if he hadn't died at birth... In our reality, however, it was this character's twin brother who lived.

As in the story, the twin also served part of his military service in Germany, during which time he passed through Britain. The Interzone version is: "I spent an hour or two in Scotland once, changing planes."

After publication, I discovered there had been no change of planes,
that the aircraft had landed to take on more fuel before flying across the
Atlantic.
Therefore, in The Best of Interzone, the line was altered to: "I spent
an hour in Scotland once. The plane was refuelling."
The place was Prestwick. The date was March 2nd, 1960, but this was too
much information to include in the story.
While researching the story, I found something that was impossible to
include, but which deserves bringing to wider attention:
The full title of "Rock around the Clock" is "(We're Gonna) Rock Around
The Clock" by Bill Haley and his Comets, which was recorded in New York
on April 12, 1954. First released on May 10, 1954 (Decca 29124), 75,000
copies of the original pressing were sold -- and, on the label, "Rock
around the Clock" was described as a "foxtrot"..
Correcting "changing planes" to "refuelling" wasn't the only change I
made to the story between magazine publication and anthology appearance.
While I had the chance, I took the opportunity to give "Off the Track"
another fine tuning.
Now the story is making its on-line debut.
And you know what?
I haven't changed a word of it!

© David Garnett 1992, 1998

'Off the Track' first appeared in Interzone 63.