

All That You Love Will Be Carried Away

It was a Motel 6 on I-80 just west of Lincoln, Nebraska. The snow that began at midafternoon had faded the sign's virulent yellow to a kinder pastel shade as the light ran out of the January dusk. The wind was closing in on that quality of empty amplification one encounters only in the country's flat midsection, usually in winter-time. That meant nothing but discomfort now, but if big snow came tonight—the weather forecasters couldn't seem to make up their minds—then the interstate would be shut down by morning. That was nothing to Alfie Zimmer.

He got his key from a man in a red vest and drove down to the end of the long cinder-block building. He had been selling in the Midwest for twenty years, and had formulated four basic rules about securing his night's rest. First, always reserve ahead. Second, reserve at a franchise motel if possible—your Holiday Inn, your Ramada Inn, your Comfort Inn, your Motel 6. Third, always ask for a room on the end. That way, the worst you could have was one set of noisy neighbors. Last, ask for a room that begins with a one. Alfie was forty-four, too old to be fucking truck-stop whores, eating chicken-fried steak, or hauling his luggage upstairs. These days, the rooms on the first floor were usually reserved for non-smokers. Alfie rented them and smoked anyway.

Someone had taken the space in front of Room 190. All the spaces along the building were taken. Alfie wasn't surprised. You could make a reservation, guarantee it, but if you arrived late (late on a day like

this was after 4 P.M.), you had to park and walk. The cars belonging to the early birds were nestled up to the gray cinder block and the bright-yellow doors in a long line, their windows already covered with a scrim of light snow.

Alfie drove around the corner and parked with the nose of his Chevrolet pointed at the white expanse of some farmer's field, swimming deep into the gray of day's end. At the farthest limit of vision he could see the spark lights of a farm. In there, they would be hunkered down. Out here, the wind blew hard enough to rock the car. Snow skated past, obliterating the farm lights for a few moments.

Alfie was a big man with a florid face and a smoker's noisy respiration. He was wearing a topcoat, because when you were selling that was what people liked to see. Not a jacket. Storekeepers sold to people wearing jackets and John Deere caps, they didn't buy from them. The room key lay on the seat beside him. It was attached to a diamond of green plastic. The key was a real key, not a MagCard. On the radio Clint Black was singing "Nothin' but the Tail Lights." It was a country song. Lincoln had an FM rocker now, but rock-and-roll music didn't seem right to Alfie. Not out here, where if you switched over to AM you could still hear angry old men calling down hellfire.

He shut off the engine, put the key to 190 in his pocket, and checked to make sure he still had his notebook in there, too. His old pal. "Save Russian Jews," he said, reminding himself. "Collect valuable prizes."

He got out of the car and a gust of wind hit him hard, rocking him back on his heels, flapping his pants around his legs, making him laugh a smoker's surprised rattlebox laugh.

His samples were in the trunk, but he wouldn't need them tonight. No, not tonight, not at all. He took his suitcase and his briefcase out of the backseat, shut the door, then pushed the black button on his key fob. That one locked all the doors. The red one set off an alarm, what you were supposed to use if you were going to get mugged. Alfie had never been mugged. He guessed that few salesmen of gourmet foods were, especially in this part of the country. There was a market for gourmet foods in Nebraska, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Kansas; even in the Dakotas, although many might not believe it. Alfie had done

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quite well, especially over the last two years as he got to know the market's deeper creases—but it was never going to equal the market for, let's say, fertilizer. Which he could smell even now on the winter wind that was freezing his cheeks and turning them an even darker shade of red.

He stood where he was a moment longer, waiting for the wind to drop. It did, and he could see the spark lights again. The farmhouse. And was it possible that behind those lights, some farmer's wife was even now heating up a pot of Cottager Split Pea Soup or perhaps microwaving a Cottager Shepherd's Pie or Chicken Français? It was. It was as possible as hell. While her husband watched the early news with his shoes off and his sock feet on a hassock, and overhead their son played a video game on his GameCube and their daughter sat in the tub, chin-deep in fragrant bubbles, her hair tied up with a ribbon, reading *The Golden Compass*, by Philip Pullman, or perhaps one of the Harry Potter books, which were favorites of Alfie's daughter, Carlene. All that going on behind the spark lights, some family's universal joint turning smoothly in its socket, but between them and the edge of this parking lot was a mile and a half of flat field, white in the running-away light of a low sky, comatose with the season. Alfie briefly imagined himself walking into that field in his city shoes, his briefcase in one hand and his suitcase in the other, working his way across the frozen furrows, finally arriving, knocking; the door would be opened and he would smell pea soup, that good hearty smell, and hear the KETV meteorologist in the other room saying, "But now look at this low-pressure system just coming over the Rockies."

And what would Alfie say to the farmer's wife? That he just dropped by for dinner? Would he advise her to save Russian Jews, collect valuable prizes? Would he begin by saying, "Ma'am, according to at least one source I've read recently, all that you love will be carried away"? That would be a good conversation opener, sure to interest the farmer's wife in the wayfaring stranger who had just walked across her husband's east field to knock on her door. And when she invited him to step in, to tell her more, he could open his briefcase and give her a couple of his sample books, tell her that

once she discovered the Cottager brand of quick-serve gourmet delicacies she would almost certainly want to move on to the more sophisticated pleasures of Ma Mère. And, by the way, did she have a taste for caviar? Many did. Even in Nebraska.

Freezing. Standing here and freezing.

He turned from the field and the spark lights at the far end of it and walked to the motel, moving in careful duck steps so he wouldn't go ass over teakettle. He had done it before, God knew. Whoops-a-daisy in half a hundred motel parking lots. He had done most of it before, actually, and supposed that was at least part of the problem.

There was an overhang, so he was able to get out of the snow. There was a Coke machine with a sign saying, USE CORRECT CHANGE. There was an ice machine and a Snax machine with candy bars and various kinds of potato chips behind curls of metal like bedsprings. There was no USE CORRECT CHANGE sign on the Snax machine. From the room to the left of the one where he intended to kill himself, Alfie could hear the early news, but it would sound better in that farmhouse over yonder, he was sure of that. The wind boomed. Snow swirled around his city shoes, and then Alfie let himself into his room. The light switch was to the left. He turned it on and shut the door.

He knew the room; it was the room of his dreams. It was square. The walls were white. On one was a picture of a small boy in a straw hat, asleep with a fishing pole in his hand. There was a green rug on the floor, a quarter-inch of some nubby synthetic stuff. It was cold in here right now, but when he pushed the Hi Heat button on the control panel of the Climatron beneath the window the place would warm up fast. Would probably become hot. A counter ran the length of one wall. There was a TV on it. On top of the TV was a piece of cardboard with ONE-TOUCH MOVIES! printed on it.

There were twin double beds, each covered with bright-gold spreads that had been tucked under the pillows and then pulled over them, so the pillows looked like the corpses of infants. There was a table between the beds with a Gideon Bible, a TV-channel guide, and a flesh-colored phone on it. Beyond the second bed was the door to the bathroom. When you turned on the light in there, the fan would go

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on, too. If you wanted the light, you got the fan, too. There was no way around it. The light itself would be fluorescent, with the ghosts of dead flies inside. On the counter beside the sink there would be a hot plate and a Proctor-Silex electric kettle and little packets of instant coffee. There was a smell in here, the mingling of some harsh cleaning fluid and mildew on the shower curtain. Alfie knew it all. He had dreamed it right down to the green rug, but that was no accomplishment, it was an easy dream. He thought about turning on the heater, but that would rattle, too, and, besides, what was the point?

Alfie unbuttoned his topcoat and put his suitcase on the floor at the foot of the bed closest to the bathroom. He put his briefcase on the gold coverlet. He sat down, the sides of his coat spreading out like the skirt of a dress. He opened his briefcase, thumbed through the various brochures, catalogues, and order forms; finally he found the gun. It was a Smith & Wesson revolver, .38 caliber. He put it on the pillows at the head of the bed.

He lit a cigarette, reached for the telephone, then remembered his notebook. He reached into his right coat pocket and pulled it out. It was an old Spiral, bought for a buck forty-nine in the stationery department of some forgotten five-and-dime in Omaha or Sioux City or maybe Jubilee, Kansas. The cover was creased and almost completely innocent of any printing it might once have borne. Some of the pages had pulled partially free of the metal coil that served as the notebook's binding, but all of them were still there. Alfie had been carrying this notebook for almost seven years, ever since his days selling Universal Product Code readers for Simonex.

There was an ashtray on the shelf under the phone. Out here, some of the motel rooms still came with ashtrays, even on the first floor. Alfie fished for it, put his cigarette on the groove, and opened his notebook. He flipped through pages written with a hundred different pens (and a few pencils), pausing to read a couple of entries. One read: "I suckt Jim Morrison's cock w/my poutie boy mouth (LAWRENCE KS)." Restrooms were filled with homosexual graffiti, most of it tiresome and repetitive, but "poutie boy mouth" was pretty good. Another was "Albert Gore is my favorite whore (MURDO S DAK)."

The last page, three-quarters of the way through the book, had just two entries. “Dont chew the Trojan Gum it taste’s just like rubber (AVOCA IA).” And: “Poopie doopie you so loopy (PAPILLION NEB).” Alfie was crazy about that one. Something about the “-ie, -ie,” and then, boom, you got “-y.” It could have been no more than an illiterate’s mistake (he was sure that would have been Maura’s take on it) but why think like that? What fun was that? No, Alfie preferred (even now) to believe that “-ie, -ie,” . . . wait for it . . . “-y” was an intended construction. Something sneaky but playful, with the feel of an e. e. cummings poem.

He rummaged through the stuff in his inside coat pocket, feeling papers, an old toll-ticket, a bottle of pills—stuff he had quit taking—and at last finding the pen that always hid in the litter. Time to record today’s finds. Two good ones, both from the same rest area, one over the urinal he had used, the other written with a Sharpie on the map case beside the Hav-A-Bite machine. (Snax, which in Alfie’s opinion vended a superior product line, had for some reason been disenfranchised in the I-80 rest areas about four years ago.) These days Alfie sometimes went two weeks and three thousand miles without seeing anything new, or even a viable variation on something old. Now, two in one day. Two on the *last* day. Like some sort of omen.

His pen had COTTAGER FOODS THE *GOOD STUFF!* written in gold along the barrel, next to the logo, a thatched hut with smoke coming out of the quaintly crooked chimney.

Sitting there on the bed, still in his topcoat, Alfie bent studiously over his old notebook so that his shadow fell on the page. Below “Dont chew the Trojan Gum” and “Poopie doopie you so loopy,” Alfie added “Save Russian Jews, collect valuable prizes (WALTON NEB)” and “All that you love will be carried away (WALTON NEB).” He hesitated. He rarely added notes, liking his finds to stand alone. Explanation rendered the exotic mundane (or so he had come to believe; in the early years he had annotated much more freely), but from time to time a footnote still seemed to be more illuminating than demystifying.

He starred the second entry—“All that you love will be carried

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away (WALTON NEB)"—and drew a line two inches above the bottom of the page, and wrote.*

He put the pen back in his pocket, wondering why he or anyone would continue anything this close to ending everything. He couldn't think of a single answer. But of course you went on breathing, too. You couldn't stop it without rough surgery.

The wind gusted outside. Alfie looked briefly toward the window, where the curtain (also green, but a different shade from the rug) had been drawn. If he pulled it back, he would be able to see chains of light on Interstate 80, each bright bead marking sentient beings running on the rod of the highway. Then he looked back down at his book. He meant to do it, all right. This was just . . . well . . .

"Breathing," he said, and smiled. He picked his cigarette out of the ashtray, smoked, returned it to the groove, and thumbed back through the book again. The entries recalled thousands of truck stops and roadside chicken shacks and highway rest areas the way certain songs on the radio can bring back specific memories of a place, a time, the person you were with, what you were drinking, what you were thinking.

"Here I sit, brokenhearted, tried to shit but only farted." Everyone knew that one, but here was an interesting variation from Double D Steaks in Hooker, Oklahoma: "Here I sit, I'm at a loss, trying to shit out taco sauce. I know I'm going to drop a load, only hope I don't explode." And from Casey, Iowa, where SR 25 crossed I-80: "My mother made me a whore." To which someone had added in very different penmanship: "If I supply the yarn will she make me one?"

He had started collecting when he was selling the UPCs, noting various bits of graffiti in the Spiral notebook without at first knowing why he was doing it. They were just amusing, or disconcerting, or both at the same time. Yet little by little he had become fascinated with these messages from the interstate, where the only other communications seemed to be dipped headlights when you passed in the

*"To read this you must also look at the exit ramp from the Walton Rest Area back to highway, i.e. at departing transients."

rain, or maybe somebody in a bad mood flipping you the bird when you went by in the passing lane pulling a rooster-tail of snow behind you. He came gradually to see—or perhaps only to hope—that something was going on here. The e. e. cummings lilt of “Poopie doopie you so loopy,” for instance, or the inarticulate rage of “1380 West Avenue kill my mother TAKE HER JEWELS.”

Or take this oldie: “Here I sit, cheeks a-flexin’, giving birth to another Texan.” The meter, when you considered it, was odd. Not iambs but some odd triplet formula with the stress on the third: “Here I *sit*, cheeks a-*flexin*’, giving *birth* to *another Texan*.” Okay, it broke down a little at the end, but that somehow added to its memorability, gave it that final mnemonic twist of the tail. He had thought on many occasions that he could go back to school, take some courses, get all that feet-and-meter stuff down pat. Know what he was talking about instead of running on a tightrope of intuition. All he really remembered clearly from school was iambic pentameter: “To be or not to be, that is the question.” He had seen that in a men’s room on I-70, actually, to which someone had added, “The real question is who your father was, dipstick.”

These triplets, now. What were *they* called? Was that trochaic? He didn’t know. The fact that he could find out no longer seemed important, but he could find out, yes. It was something people taught; it was no big secret.

Or take this variation, which Alfie had also seen all over the country: “Here I sit, on the pooper, giving birth to a Maine state trooper.” It was always Maine, no matter where you were it was always Maine State Trooper, and why? Because no other state would scan. Maine was the only one of the fifty whose name consisted of a single syllable. Yet again, it was in triplets: “Here I *sit*, on the *pooper*.”

He had thought of writing a book. Just a little one. The first title to occur to him had been “Don’t Look Up Here, You’re Pissing on Your Shoes,” but you couldn’t call a book that. Not and reasonably hope someone would put it out for sale in a store, anyway. And, besides, that was light. Frothy. He had become convinced over the years that something was going on here, and it wasn’t frothy. The title

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he had finally decided on was an adaptation of something he'd seen in a rest-area toilet stall outside Fort Scott, Kansas, on Highway 54. "I Killed Ted Bundy: The Secret Transit Code of America's Highways." By Alfred Zimmer. That sounded mysterious and ominous, almost scholarly. But he hadn't done it. And although he had seen "If I supply the yarn, will she make me one" added to "My mother made me a whore" all over the country, he had never expounded (at least in writing) on the startling lack of sympathy, the "just deal with it" sensibility, of the response. Or what about "Mammon is the King of New Jersey"? How did one explain why New Jersey made it funny and the name of some other state probably wouldn't? Even to try seemed almost arrogant. He was just a little man, after all, with a little man's job. He sold things. A line of frozen dinners, currently.

And now, of course . . . now . . .

Alfie took another deep drag on his cigarette, mashed it out, and called home. He didn't expect to get Maura and didn't. It was his own recorded voice that answered him, ending with the number of his cell-phone. A lot of good that would do; the cell-phone was in the trunk of the Chevrolet, broken. He had never had good luck with gadgets.

After the beep he said, "Hi, it's me. I'm in Lincoln. It's snowing. Remember the casserole you were going to take over to my mother. She'll be expecting it. And she asked for the Red Ball coupons. I know you think she's crazy on that subject, but humor her, okay? She's old. Tell Carlene Daddy says hi." He paused, then for the first time in about five years added, "I love you."

He hung up, thought about another cigarette—no worries about lung cancer, not now—and decided against it. He put the notebook, open to the last page, beside the telephone. He picked up the gun and rolled out the cylinder. Fully loaded. He snapped the cylinder back in with a flick of his wrist, then slipped the short barrel into his mouth. It tasted of oil and metal. He thought, *Here I SIT, about to COOL it, my plan to EAT a fuckin' BOOL-it.* He grinned around the barrel. That was terrible. He never would have written that down in his book.

Then another thought occurred to him and he put the gun back in its trench on the pillow, drew the phone to him again, and once more

dialled home. He waited for his voice to recite the useless cell-phone number, then said, "Me again. Don't forget Rambo's appointment at the vet day after tomorrow, okay? Also the sea-jerky strips at night. They really do help his hips. Bye."

He hung up and raised the gun again. Before he could put the barrel in his mouth, his eye fell on the notebook. He frowned and put the gun down. The book was open to the last four entries. The first thing anyone responding to the shot would see would be his dead body, sprawled across the bed closest to the bathroom, his head hanging down and bleeding on the nubby green rug. The second thing, however, would be the Spiral notebook, open to the final written page.

Alfie imagined some cop, some Nebraska state trooper who would never be written about on any bathroom wall due to the disciplines of scansion, reading those final entries, perhaps turning the battered old notebook toward him with the tip of his own pen. He would read the first three entries—"Trojan Gum," "Poopie doopie," "Save Russian Jews"—and dismiss them as insanity. He would read the last line, "All that you love will be carried away," and decide that the dead guy had regained a little rationality at the end, just enough to write a halfway sensible suicide note.

Alfie didn't like the idea of people thinking he was crazy (further examination of the book, which contained such information as "Medger Evers is alive and well in Disneyland," would only confirm that impression). He was not crazy, and the things he had written here over the years weren't crazy, either. He was convinced of it. And if he was wrong, if these were the rantings of lunatics, they needed to be examined even more closely. That thing about don't look up here, you're pissing on your shoes, for instance, was that humor? Or a growl of rage?

He considered using the john to get rid of the notebook, then shook his head. He'd end up on his knees with his shirtsleeves rolled back, fishing around in there, trying to get the damn thing back out. While the fan rattled and the fluorescent buzzed. And although immersion might blur some of the ink, it wouldn't blur all of it. Not enough. Besides, the notebook had been with him so long, riding in

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his pocket across so many flat and empty Midwest miles. He hated the idea of just flushing it away.

The last page, then? Surely one page, balled up, would go down. But that would leave the rest for them (there was always a them) to discover, all that clear evidence of an unsound mind. They'd say, "Lucky he didn't decide to visit a schoolyard with an AK-47. Take a bunch of little kids with him." And it would follow Maura like a tin can tied to a dog's tail. "Did you hear about her husband?" they'd ask each other in the supermarket. "Killed himself in a motel. Left a book full of crazy stuff. Lucky he didn't kill *her*." Well, he could afford to be a little hard about that. Maura was an adult, after all. Carlene, on the other hand . . . Carlene was . . .

Alfie looked at his watch. At her j.-v. basketball game, that's where Carlene was right now. Her teammates would say most of the same things the supermarket ladies would say, only within earshot and accompanied by those chilling seventh-grade giggles. Eyes full of glee and horror. Was that fair? No, of course not, but there was nothing fair about what had happened to him, either. Sometimes when you were cruising along the highway, you saw big curls of rubber that had unwound from the recap tires some of the independent truckers used. That was what he felt like now: thrown tread. The pills made it worse. They cleared your mind just enough for you to see what a colossal jam you were in.

"But I'm not crazy," he said. "That doesn't make me crazy." No. Crazy might actually be better.

Alfie picked up the notebook, flipped it closed much as he had flipped the cylinder back into the .38, and sat there tapping it against his leg. This was ludicrous.

Ludicrous or not, it nagged him. The way thinking a stove burner might still be on sometimes nagged him when he was home, nagged until he finally got up and checked and found it cold. Only this was worse. Because he loved the stuff in the notebook. Amassing graffiti—thinking about graffiti—had been his real work these last years, not selling price-code readers or frozen dinners that were really not much more than Swansons or Freezer Queens in fancy microwavable

dishes. The daffy exuberance of “Helen Keller fucked her feller!” for instance. Yet the notebook might be a real embarrassment once he was dead. It would be like accidentally hanging yourself in the closet because you were experimenting with a new way of jacking off and got found that way with your shorts under your feet and shit on your ankles. Some of the stuff in his notebook might show up in the newspaper, along with his picture. Once upon a time he would have scoffed at the idea, but in these days, when even Bible Belt newspapers routinely speculated about a mole on the President’s penis, the notion was hard to dismiss.

Burn it, then? No, he’d set off the goddamned smoke detector.

Put it behind the picture on the wall? The picture of the little boy with the fishing pole and the straw hat?

Alfie considered this, then nodded slowly. Not a bad idea at all. The Spiral notebook might stay there for years. Then, someday in the distant future, it would drop out. Someone—perhaps a lodger, more likely a maid—would pick it up, curious. Would flip through it. What would that person’s reaction be? Shock? Amusement? Plain old head-scratching puzzlement? Alfie rather hoped for this last. Because things in the notebook were puzzling. “Elvis killed Big Pussy,” someone in Hackberry, Texas, had written. “Serenity is being square,” someone in Rapid City, South Dakota, had opined. And below that, someone had written, “No, stupid, $\text{serenity} = (va)^2 + b$, if $v = \text{serenity}$, $a = \text{satisfaction}$, and $b = \text{sexual compatibility}$.”

Behind the picture, then.

Alfie was halfway across the room when he remembered the pills in his coat pocket. And there were more in the glove compartment of the car, different kinds but for the same thing. They were prescription drugs, but not the sort the doctor gave you if you were feeling . . . well . . . sunny. So the cops would search this room thoroughly for other kinds of drugs and when they lifted the picture away from the wall the notebook would drop out onto the green rug. The things in it would look even worse, even crazier, because of the pains he had taken to hide it.

And they’d read the last thing as a suicide note, simply because it

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was the last thing. No matter where he left the book, that would happen. Sure as shit sticks to the ass of America, as some East Texas turnpike poet had once written.

“If they find it,” he said, and just like that the answer came to him.

The snow had thickened, the wind had grown even stronger, and the spark lights across the field were gone. Alfie stood beside his snow-covered car at the edge of the parking lot with his coat billowing out in front of him. At the farm, they'd all be watching TV by now. The whole fam' damly. Assuming the satellite dish hadn't blown off the barn roof, that was. Back at his place, his wife and daughter would be arriving home from Carlene's basketball game. Maura and Carlene lived in a world that had little to do with the interstates, or fast-food boxes blowing down the breakdown lanes and the sound of semis passing you at seventy and eighty and even ninety miles an hour like a Doppler whine. He wasn't complaining about it (or hoped he wasn't); he was just pointing it out. “Nobody here even if there is,” someone in Chalk Level, Missouri, had written on a shithouse wall, and sometimes in those rest-area bathrooms there was blood, mostly just a little, but once he had seen a grimy basin under a scratched steel mirror half filled with it. Did anyone notice? Did anyone report such things?

In some rest areas the weather report fell constantly from overhead speakers, and to Alfie the voice giving it sounded haunted, the voice of a ghost running through the vocal cords of a corpse. In Candy, Kansas, on Route 283, in Ness County, someone had written, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock,” to which someone else had added, “If your not from Pudlishers Cleering House go away you Bad Boy.”

Alfie stood at the edge of the pavement, gasping a little because the air was so cold and full of snow. In his left hand he held the Spiral notebook, bent almost double. There was no need to destroy it, after all. He would simply throw it into Farmer John's east field, here on the west side of Lincoln. The wind would help him. The notebook might

carry twenty feet on the fly, and the wind could tumble it even farther before it finally fetched up against the side of the furrow and was covered. It would lie there buried all winter, long after his body had been shipped home. In the spring, Farmer John would come out this way on his tractor, the cab filled with the music of Patty Loveless or George Jones or maybe even Clint Black, and he would plow the Spiral notebook under without seeing it and it would disappear into the scheme of things. Always supposing there was one. "Relax, it's all just the rinse cycle," someone had written beside a pay phone on I-35 not far from Cameron, Missouri.

Alfie drew the book back to throw it, then lowered his arm. He hated to let it go, that was the truth of it. That was the bottom line everyone was always talking about. But things were bad, now. He raised his arm again and then lowered it again. In his distress and indecision he began to cry without being aware of it. The wind rushed around him, on its way to wherever. He couldn't go on living the way he had been living, he knew that much. Not one more day. And a shot in the mouth would be easier than any living change, he knew that, too. Far easier than struggling to write a book few people (if any at all) were likely to read. He raised his arm again, cocked the hand with the notebook in it back to his ear like a pitcher preparing to throw a fastball, then stood like that. An idea had occurred to him. He would count to sixty. If the spark lights of the farmhouse reappeared at any time during that count, he would try to write the book.

To write a book like that, he thought, you'd have to begin by talking about how it was to measure distance in green mile markers, and the very width of the land, and how the wind sounded when you got out of your car at one of those rest areas in Oklahoma or North Dakota. How it sounded almost like words. You'd have to explicate the silence, and how the bathrooms always smelled of piss and the great hollow farts of departed travellers, and how in that silence the voices on the walls began to speak. The voices of those who had written and then moved on. The telling would hurt, but if the wind dropped and the spark lights of the farm came back, he'd do it anyway.

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If they didn't he'd throw the notebook into the field, go back into Room 190 (just hang a left at the Snax machine), and shoot himself, as planned.

Either way. Either way.

Alfie stood there counting to sixty inside his head, waiting to see if the wind would drop.

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I like to drive, and I'm particularly addicted to those long interstate barrels where you see nothing but prairies to either side and a cinderblock rest area every forty miles or so. Rest-area bathrooms are always full of graffiti, some of it extremely weird. I started to collect these dispatches from nowhere, keeping them in a pocket notebook, got others off the Internet (there are two or three websites dedicated to them), and finally found the story in which they belonged. This is it. I don't know if it's good or not, but I cared very much for the lonely man at its center and really hope things turned out okay for him. In the first draft things did, but Bill Buford of The New Yorker suggested a more ambiguous ending. He was probably right, but we could all say a prayer for the Alfie Zimmers of the world.

