

Up Around the Bend

by Paul Di Filippo

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N,NNN Words.

Moving to the country, gonna eat a lot of peaches....

—Presidents of the United States, “Peaches”

Eternal waters away

From the cities of nine

Day’s night whose towers will catch

In the religious wind

Like stalks of tall, dry straw...

—Dylan Thomas,

“Author’s Prologue”

Tomorrow’s just an excuse away.

—The Smashing Pumpkins,

“Thirty-three”

Heading up around the bend, leaving the sinking ship behind, hoping to reach the place where the neons turn to wood, and the water tastes like wine: a brand-new game, a crystal day:

Afternoon August sunlight splashed the drowsing land. Space and time seemed stunned, slowed. Cathedrals of wild grape hosted congregations of small twittering birds. Water bearing an intermittent film of rainbow’d oil and floating paper debris rilled along a small frond-carpeted slough, the litter a factitious fleet sailing toward some unknown port. A rust-girdered billboard spiked into the earth reared up like a fragment of some ancient border fortification.

The line of dead and abandoned cars along the road’s green margin afforded slim pickings for stragglers in the great exodus.

A grease-stained Pendleton blanket in burgundy checks; a transistor radio thick as a brick, whose weak-battered reception brought in only static; wind-perused copies of *Ramparts*, the *Oracle*, the *East Village Other*, *Silver Surfer*, *Make* and *Wired*; a half-empty bottle of Tang; a ripped T-shirt bearing Hendrix’s portrait, and one advertising *Desperate Housewives*; a lurid gatefold album missing its vinyl contents; CDs in cracked jewel cases; a cardboard six-pack of Fanta soda in thick glass bottles; a BlackBerry with a smashed screen; a fringed leather vest; a Polar Fleece pullover; a torn draft card; a big Mars bar blazoned 5¢; a snack package of dried green peas rich with Japanese script; an empty can of

DelMonte peaches in light syrup. . . .

All salted with plasticized nuggets of windshield glass, seasoned with rain and wind and sun.

Mitch pulled his head and shoulders out of the blue SUV with a seasonally incongruous ski rack atop. In one hand, a crack pipe and a vial of rocks. A grin split his wheaten-whiskered face.

“Hey, Vee, check it out!”

Verna turned from her own inspection of a Volkswagen minivan painted in Beardsley motifs. She saw Mitch leaning against the blue woodie wagon with useless surfboards racked on its roof. He was flaunting a baggie holding a small drift of weed and a packet of rolling papers.

Tucking the abused paperback she had just found into her low-slung backpack, Verna crossed the hot tar strip separating her from her brother. She took the baggie from his hands.

“Cool. Looks like good stuff. No sticks.”

Mitch slung an arm around his wife’s waist and pulled her close to him: denim’d hip against denim’d hip. He kissed her honey-colored neck before she broke away.

“Wanna fire ‘er up?”

“Sure.”

Mitch reclaimed the pipe and vial. “Let’s get into some shade. How ‘bout in here?”

Verna shivered and shook her head, sending her long russet-roan hair scrimming and unscrimming her face. “Not gonna crawl into any of these hulks. All moldy and ghosty. . . .”

“All right, all right, lessee. . . .”

The nearest tree stood several yards away, a lone sentinel watching the distant city’s advance over the years, beyond the impenetrable wild grapes and across the marshy land surrounding the slough. Mitch looked elsewhere.

“How ‘bout over there?”

The billboard cast a lozenge of shade across the weeds at its base.

““kay.”

They walked along the road a short distance, Verna’s wooden-soled clogs, almost invisible beneath her bell-bottoms, clonking on the pavement, while Mitch’s Adidas’d feet made slight scuffing sounds.

They dropped their packs near the stanchions of the hoarding—Mitch’s pack all stained Army surplus canvas, rivets and leather straps; Verna’s a fresh Patagonia affair of colored synthetics, zippers, and plastic interlocks—and nimbly folded their legs to lower their butts to the ground. Verna watched as grinning Mitch expertly rolled a joint. His smile infected her, and she grinned too.

“I remember the first time I saw you doing that. Caught you in the basement after school. Good thing Mom and Pop never knew what dope smelled like.”

Mitch used a disposable plastic lighter to heat the bowl of the pipe. When the junk was ready, he took a deep drag, before passing the pipe to Verna.

Verna took the joint and sucked twin lungfuls.

When they exhaled, their heterogenous smokes mingled in the air before their faces.

They consumed the drugs quickly, leaving them in contrasting states.

Mitch jumped to his feet, wired and antsy. Verna reclined at length, cradling her head in her hands. Her white peasant blouse, pricked with embroidered flowers, slid up to reveal her midriff, skin lightly dusted with near-invisible hairs. Her big loose breasts wallowed.

Pacing back and forth in front of the billboard, Mitch began to rant. His blue eyes seemed lit from behind by guttering gas flames.

“I can still smell the ashes, you know? It’s like I can’t escape them, no matter how far we go. The air was full of ashes from downtown all the way to midtown. The plume drifted across the rivers too. Lasted for days. Weeks, maybe. Time’s all fucked up. Who knows what the hell was in that stuff? Chemicals, maybe even radioactive shit. Roast flesh. It gets inside you. You’re gonna carry it around forever.”

Mitch pushed up the front of his T-shirt bearing the Quiksilver logo and began furiously to scratch his hairy stomach, as if in pursuit of bugs beneath his skin. He raised welts, and, eventually, trickles of blood.

Verna continued to lie at ease, seemingly oblivious to her brother’s distress. Her eyes closed, she appeared asleep, until she softly spoke.

“This whole trip reminds me of Woodstock a little. I know it’s different this time, but it’s kinda the same. Everyone leaving the city behind spontaneous-like, heading for a sweet spot they heard about somewhere, somehow. Even if they don’t quite know where it is or how to get there, they’re still moving on faith. Get as far as your motherfucking plastic-fantastic car can take you before it dies, then go on foot. Just like you and me, Mitch. It’ll be heaven when we get there, don’t you doubt it.”

Verna’s words had no effect on Mitch’s anxiety. He ceased scratching and suddenly spun around to confront the billboard.

“There’s the whole fucking problem! Right there, staring us in the face!”

The billboard featured a military recruiting poster: uniformed young men and women of several races, clad in the latest ceramic armor and carrying viperish weaponry; sleek helicopters flying low over desert sands; a battleship looking like a special-effects designer’s wet dream.

Verna sat up lazily, her breasts remolding themselves against her ribs. Thin plumes of dust, stirred by her movement, eddied up off the soil, as if from an ant’s Ground Zero. She looked at the billboard as if seeing it for the first time: a lone soldier in simple fatigues, carrying a bulky M-16 and wearing a helmet that resembled a cook-pot, posed against a jungle backdrop.

“Mitch, I know the war’s a drag. But it’s gonna end soon, you’ll see. The power of the people will bring it to a screeching halt. People in the street, making their voices heard. The President’s going down, that shifty bastard.”

Mitch spun about to divert his rage from the billboard to his wife.

“People in the streets! What streets, Vee? The city’s almost empty. The floodwaters are still up to our necks, and hurricane season’s still got months to run! And everyone’s too scared to make a stink. Terrorists! They’ve got everyone running like sheep. ‘Oh, please, protect us, protect us!’ The President knows that he can do anything, so long as he waves that terrorist flag.”

Vee got her feet beneath her and effortlessly flowed upright, all coiled muscle and supple flesh. She approached her paranoid brother and hugged him. Mitch’s face softened, and he clutched her with violent affection as she crooned reassurances to him.

“C’mon, bro, it’s gonna be fine. Everything’ll work out okay. You’ll see, you’ll see....”

Grief choked Mitch’s deflated voice. “Sorry, Vee. Sorry to get so heavy. You’re so good for me. You’re the only thing that keeps me centered. But I’m just a drag on you.”

Vee laughed, bright as water plashing in a fountain. “Don’t be silly! You’re not a drag, you’re my anchor. Without you, I’d float away, up into the sky.”

Vee released her brother and mimicked floating away, rising on her tiptoes and straining her arms upward. For a brief moment, she looked as if she might slip the bonds of gravity and ascend toward the day-hidden stars.

Mitch beamed, his grief and anger dissipated by Vee’s silly charade. “I won’t let that happen, count on it. This sad old world needs you here.”

Vee stooped for her pack. Her taut jeans tightened further across her shapely ass. “C’mon, let’s get a move on. Whatever we’re looking for, it’s not here, it’s up ahead somewhere.”

Slithering leather straps over his shoulders, Mitch followed Vee’s lead, and they moved off down the road.

At the end of a short gravel lane stemming from the highway, the deserted farmhouse—dusk-shawl’d, centered on a shaggy lawn—appealed to Vee’s sensibilities. No corpses, human or animal, spoiled the pristine, pastoral tableau. The windows of the small cottage boasted all their glass intact. The front door remained unshattered, hanging neatly closed in its frame. Although no smoke rose from the chimney, nor did any movement inside disturb its gingham curtains, the place looked as if the owner had stepped away mere moments ago. A television aerial, rising like a Mondrian scarecrow from the roof, bespoke intimate evenings in front of the electronic hearth, receiving civilization’s bounty while remote from its demands.

Crickets had begun to call. The last rays of day crowned treetops with a lurid crimson.

Mitch hailed the farmhouse from a safe distance. Receiving neither warning nor encouragement, he tossed a handful of gravel at the house, where it rattled off the up-angled satellite dish hung low on the eaves. Nothing.

“Okay, I guess it’s safe. C’mon.”

Inside the front door, while Mitch advanced further into the shadowy interior, Vee idly flipped a lightswitch, producing only a marginally deeper darkness. Electricity. How nice to have it. But not tonight.

“Hey, honey, check out the kitchen! Candles—and baked beans!”

Vee joined Mitch in the kitchen. A musty odor caused her to crinkle her nose. Spilled cereal crunched underfoot. Although ransacked, presumably by the departing owners, the pantry shelves, lined with crisp printed shelf paper, still hosted a stray can or three. Mitch gleefully held up a single tall can of B&M baked beans as if he were the tout highlighting a game show’s prizes.

“Any peaches? I could really go for some peaches.”

“Sorry, babe, outta luck.”

“Oh, well, just so long as it’s not sardines. I am so *sick* of sardines.”

Rummaging in a drawer, Mitch came up with a can-opener and began opening the beans. Verna moved to the sink, and, in the same spirit that had motivated her to flick the light switch, opened the taps.

Water flowed.

“Hey, Mitch—look!”

“Quick! Shut it off! Gotta be a gravity-flow tank. No telling how much’s in it.”

Verna began to poke at the stove. “Hey, bro’, what kind of weird-ass stove is this?”

Mitch licked brown juice off the razored circle of tin. “Forget it. That microwave ain’t gonna do us no good.”

An opened door on the front of stove’s lower portion revealed ashes. “This is some kind of wood stove, Mitch. I think I can get it going.”

Outside, a neat pile of short sticks of wood, shielded from the elements by an overhang, flanked the house’s rear entry off the pantry. Verna gathered up an armful. A yellowed newspaper bearing headlines of FLOOD, FIRE, ATTACKS, DEATH supplied tinder.

“Hey, Mitch, lend me your lighter.”

Verna took the chunky Zippo from her brother.

Heat began to radiate from the stove. Verna rustled down a pan from a hook, dumped the beans in it, set it atop the stove. Mitch took the disposable lighter back and set several candles alight, to combat the encroaching night.

Washed in a flickering mellow amber, they ate at a wooden table in the kitchen, using real flatware and dishes, supplementing the beans with Ritz crackers from their packs, washing down their food with tap water. They split the hunk of fatty pork. Their first hot meal in two weeks left them feeling relaxed and easy.

Mitch got up from his cane-bottomed chair. “Can’t believe we’re gonna sleep in a real bed tonight. Just gonna check out our choices.”

Her brother took a candle and left Verna alone. Relishing the fading heat from the stove, even against August’s own comforts, she admired the white laminate table and chairs, like something she had seen

once in IKEA. If only they could stay here—

But no, it was impossible. Too close to the city, right in the path of the exodus.

And it wasn't *the place*.

She would know *the place* when she arrived. Of that much she was certain. And this wasn't it.

A wavefront of golden radiance preceded Mitch.

"I found the best bed. One was ruined. Leak in the roof. 'Nother was too small. But this one's perfect."

Verna's laugh belled out. "Just like *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*!"

Mitch caught Verna up and nuzzled her neck. "Damn right! And I'm gonna eat you up! Let's go!"

Verna stepped out of her brother's embrace. "I'm not tired yet. Let's sit up a while."

The parlor offered comfortable chairs angled to take in the television, their cushions grooved to the anatomies of the fled householders. Knickknacks and framed photos of smiling strangers perched atop a mantel. Verna kicked off her shoes and folded her legs beneath her butt.

Mitch regarded the big flatscreen monitor. "Man, that's a sweet piece of tech! If only we had power—I wouldn't mind watching me that show I liked, about the castaways...."

The ungainly walnut cabinet, studded with channel selector and volume control, that held the fifteen-inch screen and its cloth-covered speaker spoke to Verna of many childhood nights spent with Mitch and their parents, watching the networks unfurl their black and white version of the American dream, a dream lost in the recent upheavals of a new age. Her mind began to superimpose familiar celebrity faces across the dead glass.

"I'd like to see *Green Acres* again. That show is so damn funny...."

For a meditative half hour they sat bemused before the dormant television, their separate trains of thoughts linked on an emotional level, their minds drifting as the candle grew shorter. Outside, night came on.

Verna broke the spell.

"Hey, bro', know what I'd like?"

"No, what?"

"A bath!"

Jumping up, Verna said, "Help me heat some water!"

The stove resupplied with wood and crackling, its top covered with the largest pans full of nascently steaming water, Verna ran gleefully to the bathroom. She filled the antique claw-footed tub half full of ambient-temperature water from the roof tank, itself still holding the sun's charge. Candlelight multiplied in the medicine-box mirror. Outside the closed bathroom window, an owl called, inquisitive rather than mournful.

Verna began to strip.

Mitch watched his wife appreciatively. Off came her peasant top, springing loose her unbound boobs. Her areolae: broad and dark; her nipples, fat and rugose. Mitch could practically feel the familiar weight of her tits in his hands.

Verna unsnapped the catch of her jeans, unladdered the garment's fly, metal teeth *zizzing*, and shoved the cloth down past her hips. Her panties: a high-waisted expanse of white filigree. She stepped out of her crumpled pants, hooked her thumbs under the band of her underwear, and skinned them off as well. Her thick bush matched the ample hair atop her head in wavy amplitude and shade.

Mitch's dick stirred in his pants like an insensible wild vine growing beneath a drift of leaf duff.

Naked, fists knuckled into the rich flesh of her hips, arms akimbo, Verna cocked her head at her brother, a smile quirking her lips.

"What're you staring at, mister? Anyone'd think you hadn't been looking at your skinny little sister buck-naked now and again ever since she was born. Go get me my water!"

Mitch left and quickly returned with two enormous aluminum kettles. He dumped the burning water into the Jacuzzi. Verna dipped a toe in.

"Better. But I need more!"

Two additional gallons of boiling water succeeded in raising the temperature of her bath to acceptable levels. Verna climbed into the old porcelain tub and stretched out. Her breasts bouyant, her pubic hair gently stirring like a sea-anemone, she closed her eyes.

"Go heat up some more water for your turn, if you want," she ordered her brother.

A momentary stasis.

The universe bisected.

Mitch split in twain.

A ghostly doppelganger stepped out from his corporeal self, like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis shaped identically to the ultimate form of its occupant. The translucent Mitch, a subtle body, wore the same clothes as the host, but the garments were filmy, insubstantial. The subtle body was tinted like its host, but much paler. Ghostly organs could be seen at work inside its body.

The ghost Mitch picked up all the empty pots and kettles, the handles visible through the flesh of his curled hands, and left the bathroom.

The corporeal Mitch began to undress. In a moment, he stood naked. The self-inflicted scratches across his stomach looked raw. His lanky physique reflected more devotion to getting high than any enjoyment of exercise. The meager diet of the recent past had also played a part in his thinness. Staked below his narrow belly, his prick stood erect, weighty balls hung like chamois eggs.

Mitch stepped over the edge of the Jacuzzi and into the cooling water. Verna's eyes remained closed, her breathing easy.

Mitch straddled his wife's chest, using projections of the molded plastic tub to brace himself.

"Suck me, Vee. Suck my cock."

Mitch put a hand behind Verna's head and lifted it upward, out of the water.

As the woman's head was raised off the tub's surface, tendrils of hair low on her neck dripping, it separated from an ectoplasmic duplicate that remained unmoved. The eyes of the female ghost head continued shut. The eyes of the fleshly woman opened.

Verna lifted her corporeal arms to grab Mitch's buttocks, her limbs peeling away from the translucent supine arms of her doppelganger. As she moved her face closer to the stiff cock quivering before her, her shoulders and upper chest separated from those selfsame portions of the still-reclining drowsing ghost.

Verna's ripe lips met the head of Mitch's prick, contoured to its swollen dimensions, and continued onward. The man groaned and urged himself deeper into her mouth. Verna gurgled with pleasure and took him down her throat. Slicking his blue-veined cock with thick saliva, she worked his shaft and glans nimbly, with tongue and lips.

Mitch's urges soon transcended these attentions. He gripped Verna under her armpits and lifted her up.

The conscious woman became fully distinct from the sleepy eidolon which swayed in the sloshing waves raised in the porcelain tub by the actions of the lovers. The corporeal man and woman did not react visibly to the floating Verna, but nonetheless positioned themselves with a blind instinct so as to avoid stepping on her.

Mitch pushed Verna forward from the waist, and she braced herself on the edge of the Jacuzzi with both hands. He dug his fingers into her roseate ass cheeks, dimpling her lush flesh ten times, and spread her buttocks to maximally display her tawny-thatched cunt for his lewd avidity. He pressed his hips forward and bobbed his dick at the split lips, but failed to gain immediate entry.

Verna's left hand appeared between her legs, grabbed Mitch's cock, and navigated him inside herself. Mitch shifted his dual grip to Verna's waist.

They fucked for several minutes, their cries and exclamations confined within the small room like birds in a cage, the floating eidolon silent witness, until Mitch's strokes accelerated and strengthened, culminating in hard convulsive slams of his groin against Verna's backside, and a mutual yowl.

Finished, the pair by slow degrees collapsed, still entwined, back into the long tub, like a slow-motion fall of twin towers.

Verna merged completely with her eidolon, and closed her eyes.

After a short time, Mitch disentangled himself from the limbs of his wife and stepped from the tub. He dried himself off with a plush blue towel but did not immediately move to dress. Instead, he stood, naked, staring down at Verna.

Mitch's subtle body returned then, striding in bearing two kettles spouting steam. As the male eidolon advanced, the corporeal Mitch remained frozen in his regard of the wet woman, taking no notice of any newcomer, allowing the eidolon to step effortlessly inside the host, fully integrating.

The clothed state of the eidolon transferred to Mitch. His clothes piled on the puddled floor sublimated away down odd dimensions.

“Hey,” Mitch called. “Wake up! My turn!”

Verna stirred, eyelids sliding up.

“Mmmm, sorry. . . . Fell asleep. Oh, man, this water’s cold! Gimme some more hot.”

“No way!”

Verna sat upright in the tub, water sluicing down her chest. “C’mon! I gotta wash up yet!”

“All right, all right. But you owe me big time!”

Mitch dumped the fresh kettles into the tub, then left.

Verna grabbed soap and a cloth and began to scrub. A puzzled pause interrupted her attentions to her twat, but she shrugged and resumed her ablutions.

By the time Mitch returned, dirty water was spiralling down the drain, and Verna wore a towel.

“Which bedroom’s the good one?”

“Upstairs, farthest one back.”

Verna exited the bathroom, her clothing draped over one arm, candle held in the other, leaving Mitch to draw his own tub.

In the parlor she retrieved her pack and carried it upstairs to the bedroom Mitch had picked.

The room featured slant ceilings, flowered wallpaper decades old; felt more like an antique ship’s cabin than a garrett. Comfy, reassuring, offering a measure of security, however false. A lone screened window admitted warm fragrant breezes.

Nice. But it still wasn’t *the place*.

Welded with drippings to a nightstand, the candle cast its small sphere of radiance. Verna doffed her towel, took an object from her pack, and climbed into bed under the thin covers.

The book she had picked up earlier that day featured a garish cover painting in reds, yellows and greens of a farm scene—much like the place she and Mitch now temporarily inhabited—where alien vegetation had overrun the familiar outlines of barn and pasture:

The Color Out of Space

H. P. Lovecraft

Verna grinned. “Cool! Just like the band!”

She began to read, but soon fell asleep, the book tumbling from her lax hand to the coverlet.

Minutes later Mitch, naked and damp, came in, carrying his own candle. The twin orbs of light overlapped irregularly, like a diagram of some obscure relationship.

Mitch picked up the book and saw a pictureless cover in white that read only:

Itinerarium Exstaticum

Athanasius Kircher

He flipped through a random sheaf of pages.

“Latin,” he muttered. “Since when...”

Shaking his head, he placed the book on the nightstand, blew out Verna’s candle, then his own, and slid beneath the sheets.

Midnight indigo flooded the room, a wave from a distant, different shore. The man and woman slept without touching, their breathing easy and light.

The water in the roof tank ran out at lunch the next day, and the weather offered no prospect of replenishing rains. The shelves in the pantry and in the cobwebbed, rock-walled cellar had yielded up all their remaining victuals, now either consumed in an orgy of calories making up for those long denied, or packed away in knapsacks old and new. The blind eye of the mute television offered no further solace. All potent urgings to leave. But, most importantly, the call of their unknown destination drew them onward.

Verna looked back at their temporary refuge when she and Mitch regained the main road. Only the tip of the television antenna showed through a gap in the foliage of the surrounding trees.

“Kinda miss that little shack already,” she said.

Mitch only grunted. He had awoken sullen that morning, perhaps jonesing for dope, and seemed unwilling to strive for cheerfulness. Verna’s natural glee shone more vibrantly against the backdrop of his gloom, as she chattered away for both of them.

“Know what I really miss? Music! If only we had some tunes, that’d be so groovy...”

Mitch dug in one hip pocket and came up with an iPod and its dangling earbuds.

“Here, use this. Found it back there. Playlist sucks, but...”

Verna took the pocket transistor radio from her brother. A single plug shaped like a fat-bottomed bowling pin depended from the chrome-decorated black plastic case.

“What good’s this gonna do me?” She socketed the plug in her ear and turned on the radio. Irritating static surged through the earpiece all across the AM band. She removed her connection to the radio and returned everything to her brother.

Mitch wired himself up and tried to evoke some music from the player, but it wouldn’t even boot.

“Goddamn it!” He tossed the iPod into the weeds along the marge. “Was working fine! You busted it somehow!”

“Did not!”

Verna’s face registered a crestfallen betrayal, like a three-year-old unjustly upbraided, and she said no

more for several hours.

In that interval, the line of dead cars finally dwindled to nothing. The final car—the first to expire, or the last?—was a VW Bug. The sweaty hikers stopped by the vehicle, drank water from plastic bottles. Mitch rested his butt on the glossy canary-yellow fiberglass body of the Bug and contemplated the road ahead.

“Maybe we’re getting closer.”

Verna kicked at the gaping rusty blue steel door of the Bug. “Maybe we’ve gone too far.”

“Hey, what’s up with you? Where’s Little Miss Sunshine?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Aw, listen, I can’t baby you. Let’s find someplace to set up camp. You sure you won’t stay in one o’ these cars?”

“I told you, I’m done with all that technological shit. *Greening of America*, remember? Small is beautiful. That’s the way the whole world’s gotta go, or our ecology is fucked. You saw those pictures of Earth the astronauts took, just like me, didn’t you? Big Blue Marble, right?”

Mitch grinned cynically and shook his head. “I dunno, Vee, I just dunno. Grubbing in the dirt, eating nuts and berries— Just ain’t gonna happen for most people. Not possible. Only way to get past this shit is better science, better tech. Can’t just throw away hundreds of years of progress.”

“If you believe that, then what’re you doing trucking all the way out here, looking for *the place*?”

“Maybe we each figure *the place* is gonna be something different from what the other one thinks.”

“Yeah, I guess. But we can’t both be right” —Verna tipped her head quizzically—“can we?”

Mitch smiled for the first time that day. “Why not?”

Verna smiled back. “Sure, why not?” She took Mitch’s hand and pulled him off the road. “C’mon! let’s check out that grove over there. Could be a neat spot to camp.”

The late-afternoon August sunlight speared the scented earth. Crushed wildflowers—daisies, black-eyed susans, blue chicory—and trompled grasses marked a broken-backed trail across the field separating the road from the grove Verna had fixed on. The man and woman jogged like children across the small prairie.

Reaching the first irregular line of trees, they stopped, breathless, Mitch particularly winded. While her brother recovered, Verna looked into the interior of the copse, a maze of tree trunks.

Figures, moving, seen in slices as if through a Venetian blind turned ninety degrees.

Verna grabbed Mitch’s arm and pulled him behind a thicket of birches that shielded them from view.

“Hey, what’s up—?”

Verna whispered, her eyes wide. “Shhh! There’s people already there!”

“So what? Maybe they’ve got some food to share.”

“But we don’t know anything about them! They could be—”

“Could be what?”

“I—I don’t know. But we should be careful.”

Mitch stepped out from concealment. “Aw, c’mon, you’re being paranoid. Everybody on the road nowadays is cool.”

“What about—what about the Mansons? What about—what about Altamont? What about, like, Dahmer and Bundy?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Let’s go—I think I can smell meat cooking!”

Mitch strode boldly and blithely off, heading for the center of the grove, and Verna had no recourse but to follow.

An animal trail, compacted dirt, ran at aleatory angles into the sheltering underbrush-choked copse. Coolness replaced the sun’s blanketing warmth.

Now Verna too could smell woodsmoke and crisping meat. Her mouth watered, despite her trepidations.

A switchback of the trail lost the hikers even partial sight of the center. But then another returned the view.

Four figures, seated now, around a plume of smoke.

Mitch announced their imminent arrival.

“Yo! Friends! Company coming!”

The four figures stood, even as Verna and Mitch broke through a last lattice of rhododendron into their campsite.

Mitch, in advance of his wife, sized up the quartet.

Fellow freaks, of course. Far out! So much for Vee’s fears....

Three white men and a black woman, risen to their feet from their log seats.

All wore jeans. The long straight hair of the three men graced their shoulders. The woman’s hair, a huge Afro.

Much shorter than his three companions, one skinny guy wore a soft fringed leather vest over his scrawny bare chest. Old acne scars pocked his narrow face. A dark-haired dude sported a thick mustache; his paisley’d button-down shirt had seen better days. The last man, blond, heavy-set, wore a surplus Army jacket over a T-shirt that proclaimed FORTUNE FAVORS THE BRAVE. The woman’s sexy face reminded Mitch of Angela Davis, as did her bright dashiki.

Mitch stepped further into the circle and extended a hand. “Hey, bloods—I’m Mitch.”

He got soul grips and names from all four.

Shorty: “Gib.”

Mustache: “Tunk.”

Blondie: “Sharkey.”

Black babe: “Retta.”

“Good to meet you all. And this is my old lady, Vee.”

Mitch turned back to Verna, and found her frozen in google-eyed shock.

“Hey, Vee, c’mon, girl, what’s up?”

Verna could not remove her eyes from the strangers.

The men’s bald skulls bore demonic black tattoos, as did their faces and necks and arms. The woman’s close-cropped hair lapped a face self-scarified in cryptic runes.

Verna forced her voice to work. “Mitch, you really think— I mean, we’ve got a lot of ground to cover— Can’t we go? Please?”

Mitch slung an arm around Verna and drew her close in a comforting gesture. “Aw, babe, drop it, okay? *The place* will still be there tomorrow. Day’s getting old, and this looks like a cool spot to crash. That is, if these good folks will let us.”

Sharkey spoke for the rest. “Sure, you’re welcome to stay the night. You can share our supper too. Maybe you got something for the pot.”

Sharkey gestured toward the fire penned within a ring of scorched stones. (His green eyes matched Mitch’s blue in intensity.) A rude rotisserie of sticks elevated two roughly butchered rabbit carcasses above the flames. Four mountaineering packs with tubular aluminum frames rested against each other like drunken friends.

“You bet,” said Mitch. “Can of green beans anyhow. Looks like some sweet grub there.”

Verna repressed her bile at the sight of blistered snakes impaled head to tail and roasting. “I—I’m not hungry.”

Gib sneered and said, “More for us.”

“Manners, Gib, manners,” Tunk admonished.

Retta stepped forward and laid a hand on Verna’s arm. Verna flinched. “You don’t look so good, girl. Come sit with me.”

The two woman occupied one of three logs triangle’d around the fire, Verna perched as far from Retta as possible. Tunk and Gib sat together, Mitch and Sharkey likewise.

Sharkey slowly spun the charring rabbits. He looked sideways at Mitch as he did so.

“So. You’re heading for *the place*. Us too.”

“Only destination that makes any sense these days.”

“Whatta you hear about it?”

“Land of milk and honey. Shangri-la and Shambhala put together. Refuge from all the heavy shit going down back in the city.”

Sharkey grinned. “Could be you’ve got an exaggerated picture of *the place*, friend. Except for that last bit. Way I heard it, it’s just another commune. One that’s doing better than others, but nothing magical about it.”

Mitch shrugged. “Either way, it’s better than any of the alternatives.”

Sharkey ran a blunt fingertip along a crusted bubbling flank of one of the rabbits, then licked the sweet grease off. “Amen, brother.” He nodded at the sizzling flesh. “These are almost done. Got an opener for those green beans?”

“Sure.”

Mitch dug the can and tool from his pack. Gib eyed the treasure with unconcealed glee.

“Any other goodies to share?” asked the skinny man.

Mitch smiled. “How’s a can of brown bread for dessert sound?”

“Sounds like we got lucky when you showed up,” said Tunk.

Sharkey said, “Get some plates ready, Tunk.” He began delicately disassembling the rotisserie, careful not to send the meat into the coals. As he worked, he asked Mitch, “Any solid clues to finding *the place*?”

“Naw, not really. But I figure we’re on the right track. All those abandoned cars—the people had to go *somewhere*, right?”

The rabbits left a smear of blood on the sticks as they came off. “Well, yeah, sure. But it might not be *the place*.”

“Where else they gonna go?”

“Can’t say. But I’m not sure *the place* is as easy to find as all that.”

Retta spoke up then. “It’s like Oz. Gotta be pure of heart and all that shit.”

Gib snickered. “No way you’re getting in then.”

“Look who’s talking, cocksucker!”

Gib started up from his log, scowling, fists bunched like small mauls. Spinning away from the pack where he’d been rummaging, Tunk caught at the little man’s vest before he could move too far. Neither Sharkey nor Retta reacted with alarm, as if this scene had played itself out numerous times before.

Mitch watched with intense impartial interest. But Verna seemed appalled, cowering at her end of the log.

Gib sat reluctantly back down. “Yeah, I’m a faggot. So what? Nothing immoral about that. Just the way some of us’re made. What you got against me anyhow, Retta? Can’t be who I fuck. You don’t rag on Tunk the way you do on me.”

Retta grinned. “Tunk’s a gentleman, no matter what he puts up his ass. You’re just a creep! We all know what you did to get that boat that took you outta the city—”

“Shut up! Just shut up!” Gib eyed all the others fiercely, then dropped his head between his spraddled knees as if guillotined, clasped his hands at the back of his neck and began to weep. Clutching some battered aluminum backpacker’s dishes, Tunk leaned over and hugged the little man, cooing wordlessly to him.

Twilight had intensified into violet umbrage; flames painted faces and forms with color and motion.

Sharkey spoke, solemn and sad. “Totally uncool, people, totally uncool. How’re we gonna reach *the place* if we can’t even hang together on the road? More to the point, is anyone gonna want to take us in once we get there, if they see us acting like we hate each other? Where’s the love, cats? Where’s the love?”

Retta’s face hosted a mutable complex expression transiting through disgust, resignation, guilt and hope. “Shee-it! I’m sorry, but I— Well, hell. Let it just stand like that. I’m sorry, Gib. Sorry, Tunk. Anyone else offended, sorry too.”

Sharkey brightened. “Okay, now that’s more like it. Gib? You okay with that?”

Gib uncradled his head and lifted it, dragged the back of one hand across his nose. Snot slimed the hairs and skin of that hand. “Yeah, yeah, sure, why not?” More aggressively: “But I don’t wanna hear no more shit from Miss Perfect!”

“Noted,” said Sharkey wryly, grinning. “Now, this rabbit’s getting cold. Who’s hungry?”

Mitch said heartily, “I could eat a little something.”

Some of the tension had dissipated from Verna’s frame, but she still held herself apart and coiled at the end of her log bench. “Not—not me. Unless—unless someone’s got peaches....”

Sharkey laughed as he pulled a knife from a belt sheath and began sawing the first rabbit—propped across the knees of his jeans, no consideration for the grease from the rabbit and the dirt from his jeans mingling—distributing it into the several scarred plates Tunk held out. “Not likely, babe. Haven’t seen them since forever. Big freeze got the native ones. Then the drought down south. Still going on, last I heard. Mexico, Central America, South America— Hell, good luck getting anything from them, way they are now.”

Each plate with its share of charred meat was passed to Mitch, who tilted his can of green beans above the plate, spilling liquid that would’ve been discarded in flusher times but was now relished, and using the pointy-tipped can opener to fork out a portion of beans.

Five servings were disbursed. Mitch used his knife to eat, but no one else had any utensils. Grease smeared their mouths and fingertips.

The fire dwindled as no one tended it, causing deeper shadows to warp the faces and figures of the

seated people. Verna's heart began to race: these were trolls, orcs, just like in that freaky hobbit book, hard-fought, decorated with clannish markings, enjoying the spoils of some gruesome slaughter.

Verna got to her feet, stumbled as a prickly-nerved leg threatened to give way.

"I—I'm gonna get some more wood for the fire...."

Mitch regarded his wife with concern. "Hey, babe, you all right?"

His teeth: sharpened to points?

"Yeah, sure, fine. I'll be right back."

Verna stepped outside the circle of firelight. The small grove seemed infinite, hushed and brooding.

What was she to do? She couldn't desert Mitch, her own brother, couldn't flee now onward toward *the place* by herself, though all instincts compelled her to do so. No, she'd just have to stay wary, not sleep, pray for the best. In the morning—the morning would be different.

Stooping to scavenge for half-sensed kindling among the dark underbrush, Verna repressed her tears. Couldn't show the others anything.

Returning with her armload of branches, Verna found Mitch and the others laughing. Sharkey was telling some kind of tale.

"So I'm crossing the bridge out of the city, right? Picture it, cars piled up every which way so I gotta climb over 'em like a mountain goat! Sweating like a bastard, not another soul in sight. But there's music coming from someplace! Then way up ahead I can see somebody dancing! Dancing on the roof of a car! I get closer, and it's this naked black chick, frugging away! Got a little battery-powered kid's record player going, spinning a stack of Motown forty-fives. And who do you think that crazy-ass broad was?"

Retta's broad grin displayed handsome clean teeth. "Oh, that's a tough one! How many guesses they get?"

"So I join her on the car roof, and she says, 'Sorry, dude, private club.' 'Private club!' I bust out laughing. Middle of a frigging disaster, and she's running her own private club for one. How far out is that? Anyhow, I managed to gain entrance, so to speak."

"We balled so hard and so long I thought that bridge was gonna come down! Thank Christ that car roof was vinyl. Even so, my ass had a pebble pattern for a week!"

"After that, we just knew we'd hit the road together, looking for *the place*. So the next night we were camped on the river bank just about a mile from the bridge. Weren't moving too fast, still looking for supplies. We see this little boat come putt-putting down the river. There's a big guy, a real fashion plate in paisleys, steering with the onboard motor from the back. And in the front, like some kinda figurehead or maybe Washington crossing the Delaware, perches this intense little runt. Thinks he's looking for Doctor Livingstone or something."

Gib took the taunt good-naturedly. "Hey! I was the goddamn navigator! The river was full of wrecks!"

Nearly ran into one drowned plane.”

“They invited us onboard,” Sharkey continued, “and we motored north. Safety in numbers, right? Hard to sneak up on someone in the middle of a river.”

Verna tossed her branches on the flames then, sending sparks skyward, and the fresh wood began to catch quickly.

Mitch nodded at his wife, glad to see her back. “Why’d you ditch the boat?”

Sharkey shrugged. “Just a feeling. River seemed to be taking us away from *the place* after a while. So we switched to foot travel. That was a few weeks ago. Still seems like the right move.”

Silence reigned while everyone contemplated the individual vision that drew them onward.

Tunk spoke. “Hey, where’s that brown bread?”

Mitch reassembled his attention on the immediate moment. “Oh, sure, one minute.” He extracted the can from his pack, opened it at both ends, so as to push the sticky round loaf out. He held out his hand for Sharkey’s knife, but Sharkey wouldn’t pass it over. He sliced the loaf himself.

Verna’s mouth watered. Surely this food would be okay....

“I—I’ll have a slice too, please.”

Mitch seemed pleased. “Damn, honey! Glad to see you coming round!”

Verna accepted the raisin-studded puck. It smelled fine, and she wolfed it down.

Tunk had taken a harmonica out of his pack, and was rendering a lively Dylan tune with passable flair. Retta and Sharkey got up to dance wildly together, sending anorexic shadows scampering among the boles. Mitch swayed in place where he sat, and Gib beat time on his thigh. Despite the incongruous appearance of the revelers—ghouls cavorting—Verna relaxed a bit.

When the music stopped Sharkey, sweat-faced, said, “Okay, who wants some sunshine?”

“Damn, yeah!

“Sure!”

“I’m there.”

“Count me in.”

Sharkey went to his pack and removed a sheet of blotter acid. The perforated sheet featured multiple images of a 1950’s-style flying saucer, as if drawn by Crumb. He turned to Verna.

“You too, Vee?”

Vee watched in horror as Sharkey thrust his dirty works at her: cooker, hypo, rubber hose. Blood and crud caked the needle’s end.

“No, I—I don’t do that stuff.”

Sharkey hunched his shoulders briefly. “Different strokes.”

After snapping off five panes, Sharkey passed four out to the others and tongued up one himself.

The four men and single woman settled down to trip: low-voiced chatter, giggles, grunts.

Verna watched them cautiously after they shared the lone needle, hoping they would just nod out from the horse, but ready for bizarre behavior.

But she was unprepared for what she saw.

The bodies of the trippers were beginning to shed numinous doppelgangers. From each form arose wispy lint-grey iterations: numerous spectral Tunks, Gibs, Mitches, Sharkeys and Rettas, naked one and all. Subliming off the originals like smoke off dry ice, the ghosts floated above the clearing, pirouetting and skylarking, swooping and curvetting, their mouths moving while no sounds emerged. Unlike the subtle bodies unconsciously untethered from Verna and Mitch back in the farmhouse, these representatives had no substantiality to interact with matter. They passed through trees without impediment.

But apparently the ghosts could affect each other.

Within moments, the specters began to indulge in an orgy. Verna watched with horror as her brother participated as fully as the others.

Two Rettas sixty-nined each other, Afro do's compressed between thighs.

Kneeling in mid-air, Tunk took the dicks of two Gibs in his mouth while another Gib fucked him from behind.

Sharkey lay on his back, Retta poised on her back above him. Sharkey maneuvered his prick up her ass, while Mitch climbed between her legs and shafted her cunt, his balls draping Sharkey's.

More and more ghosts continued to spall off the acid-heads. And the effect of this depletion was becoming evident on the hosts. Their bodies were displaying lacunae as the flock of ghosts leeches off them.

Verna jumped to her feet and dashed to Mitch's side, heedless of the immaterial curtain of fucking spirits through which she ran.

"Mitch! Mitch! Get up! Something's wrong!"

Mitch's voice was as attenuated as his body, but untroubled. "Vee, babe, chill... It's all good, just perfect in fact..."

Verna reached down to shake her brother, but her hands went right through him.

"Mitch!"

His eyes: they were now the most substantial part of him, blue orbs trailing numinous threads and suspended in cranial smoke.

She took several awkward steps backward. The process continued as before.

Within minutes, the trippers had completely evaporated, their eyes retaining normality the longest, leaving behind only their clothing, forlorn heaps.

The herd of specters now ceased their polymorphous screwing. As one, they faced in the same direction.

They flew off at a walker's pace, straight through all intervening trees, an anthropomorphic cloud, a coven of haunts hailed home.

Verna set off after them, taking nothing, leaving the guttering fire behind.

The spirits moved sedately, but flew as the crow flies, heedless of transparent trees. Verna, forced to crash through the brush and around the boles, had to hustle to keep up with them. The gap between pursuer and pursued opened wider.

She lost her clogs in the first few yards. Her clothing tore. Her face was lacerated. Tears diluted the blood.

At last she broke through the fringes of the copse, panting, and into the open land surrounding the grove.

Now the cloud of spirits was rising higher in the sky, the details of its limbs and face growing indistinct.

Verna raced after all that remained of her brother.

Vines concealed in the grass snatched at her ankles. Burrows threatened wrenchings. Tiny thorns stabbed her bare soles.

The cloud of spirits had soared so high in the sky that it now resembled a galaxy or nebula against the starscape, a constellation of souls, a pinwheeling comet. Verna tried to distinguish it from the true stars and planets, but began to doubt her identification of the proper celestial body.

Finally she had to admit defeat. The knot of specters had achieved the perfect camouflage in the empyrean.

Verna collapsed to the earth, exhausted, drained of feeling. She hung her head, chin on chest. Her lax, upward-cupped hands crushed pungent wild thyme.

She lifted her eyes after an indefinite time.

Ahead of her a tree reared alight.

The massive tree stood four stories tall, branches outspread in an impressive crown, leaves rustling in no wind. It was alight not with flames or incandescence, but with a kind of cold crimson glow that welled from within, more like faded neon than anything else. The tree seemed almost a lurid rosy X-ray of itself, or a perfect cunning hollow construct filled with lambent liquid, down to the finest leaf-vein and twig-tip.

Verna rose, and began walking.

The tree uncannily failed to illuminate anything beyond itself, in violation of all physics, as if hoarding all its precious substance. Verna strode in darkness until she stood only a yard away from the tree.

Then she stepped within its glow.

About the Author

[Paul Di Filippo](#) is the one of the most prolific writers active in SF today, publishing incalculable numbers of stories, novels and book reviews. You can stay abreast of his daily musings on his [log](#). His next book will be the novel *Cosmocopia*, out in the fall 2007 with illustrations by the supreme cartoonist Jim Woodring.

The piece printed here is the first chapter of a (temporarily?) abandoned novel of Paul's called *Up Around the Bend*. In the eventual work, this chapter is projected to bear the title: "Gone Dead Train."

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