

# Truck Stop

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Jim took his sons fishing every other Saturday. Rise at the break of dawn and breathe the fresh morning air. Three hooks breaking water's surface. Jim stared into the unblinking eyes of his catch. As time passed, Saturdays became sparse and their little boat became smaller. Jim's wife diminished, too, becoming only Finn and Pete's mother. Time spent between father and sons dwindled. And soon, Jim's moments of repose were limited, too. The road, while monotonous, was anything but tranquil. Jim's life became that road – unending, terrifying, lost. Some days he feared that the road would never cease. However, some things are constant in this world. More constant than a marriage vow is the green post labelled "Truck Stop – 1 mile ahead."

Loneliness never felt as powerful as it was inside that cement block called 'Truck Stop.' A necessary breath between hours of choking – choking on black tar and car freshener and three day-old cheese puffs. Now parked between two towering cargo tanks, Jim inhales. Exhales. He survived. It often feels as if taking that exit might be the last thing he ever does. It never is. The road hasn't swallowed him whole yet.

First things first. Shower. As he takes heavy steps out of his door, Jim scans the neon-lit, concrete wasteland. Could be any town off the highway of middle-America. His first breath of unfiltered air in hours is clouded by the stench of gasoline, cigarettes, and cheap perfume. Where is that perfume coming from?

A quick walk to the shower rooms. Ten dollars to enter a room steaming with musk and lemon. Two men rinse themselves in the stalls beside Jim, coughing and spitting and humming familiar tunes. As the lukewarm water pounds into Jim's stale brain, so do unwelcome thoughts of his old life. The old shower that always needed fixing. The kitchen sink he unclogged a dozen times. Now there is no shower head to pressurize, no sink to fiddle with. No one to make demands that once felt exploitative. The water

rushing down his pale, gray skin does little to stop the thoughts that creep in. He turns off the tap and towels off. Perhaps a burger will fill this vacant feeling.

Every single time. Every one of those Saturdays, Jim tried to teach them how to fillet their catch. “Cut down, behind the gills. Take the tip inside the skin from the head to the tail, like this,” he would explain, “then do the same thing on the other side and peel the skin off, like this. Simple as that.” Their little eyes examined the process closely.

But they always made him teach them again the next time. They never really listened to him. In his loneliness he often wonders what he did to make them stop listening. Listening shows you care. It shows respect. Sometimes he would get so frustrated... he would yell at them, and at the fish, and at the knife. At the damn lake, too. You can't make someone care about you. And you can't, no matter what, force them to listen. This was the fact that frustrated him most of all. If only they had cared enough for him, as he cared for them. He wouldn't be stuck, penniless, slave to the next Truck Stop. Sleeping between gasoline tanks, instead of walls.

Off to the burger joint, then. No need to look at the menu – why try something new? He orders a cheeseburger with fries. Across the room sits another identifiable trucker – puffy cheeks and lonely eyes. A woman sits beside him, and they clasp hands. The man puts money on the table and they walk hand-in-hand out of the dining room. Jim feels a twinge in his chest. So we are not the same. Perhaps this perceived loneliness was a projection, a need for common ground. It's much lonelier to know that no one else is as lonely as you.

A cheeseburger devoured. Two fries left in the basket; they can have each other. The waitress's smile on the way out – he tipped beyond budget. The sun finally dips below the horizon, and Jim returns home. The ambient buzz of the road sustains, never-ending. Reminding him of the fate awaiting him when the sun finally wraps itself around the base of the earth. The road beckons to him.

The fish never tasted as it should. Especially on cold, joyless dawns – of scolding and suppressed tears. On the Perfect Day, ten year-old Pete manifested a walleye. Excited, he shrieked at the sight of it, of what he was able to do. At lunch, they chatted by the grill as the perfect fillet steamed.

As they munched on Pete's victory, he probed his father: "Why's it called a 'wall-eye'?" Jim paused, and walked over to the cleaning table. He picked up two orbs.

"See these? Look how they shine." Pete stared straight into the eyes whose life he had taken. "These eyes collect light, so they can see anything in the dark. More than us, even." Pete seemed mesmerized. Jim reveled in the knowledge he could offer his eldest son. "They point outward," Jim said, rotating the dismembered eyes as if attached to the fish, "like they're looking at walls."

"But lakes don't have walls, Dad," Pete said, with intensity. There was a pause.

"Well, people do. And isn't everything about us anyway?" Jim took the eyes and threw them into the campfire. Pete's face went pale. Jim laughed. Then they all laughed, continuing to eat. The best fish Jim had ever eaten. But Jim should have seen how Pete regretted asking about the eyes. And the walls. His father could not see the fear that grew within him. Fear of the lake, the boat, the hooks, but more than anything, fear of those eyes, once so large and full of life. And his father tossed them into the raging fire as if they were dry leaves. From then on, Pete could no longer see beyond the darkness in his father. Saturdays became yelling at the cleaning table and eating flesh.

Jim always tried to be a good father. And wasn't trying the most important thing? His inability to connect with his sons couldn't be only his fault alone. So when years later, Pete and Finn chose their mother in the courtroom, Jim felt only anger. Not remorse. Their mother told Jim that they feared him, that they weren't close to him. But those words were not nearly as hurtful as those from Finn's ten year-old mouth: "We don't want to go fishing anymore." Jim remembers throwing the landline across the room.

It's finally dark. Jim's trek back to Truck Stop is unusually slow. His legs drag across the pavement as the yellow street lamps cast his shadow on the pavement before him. He recognizes himself in that shadow; more than any mirror or photograph. It seems to be reaching, stretching, searching for something in the darkness. But it's tied to the ground. Tied to the ground of Truck Stop. As empty and lifeless and hopeless as the dead eyes of the walleye.

That familiar scent of cheap perfume wafts again in his direction. His eyes follow his nose to an unlit, high-heeled woman being given cash through the window of his next-door neighbor. As she walks away, Jim considers calling her over. But before he does, he turns his eyes to his neighbor's front seat. Although it is dark, and only a single street lamp illuminates his eyes, Jim recognizes the man beside him. The man from the burger joint. Lonely Man.

Lonely Man turns and looks at Jim. Their eyes connect for a few moments, before Lonely Man breaks, leaning back in his seat and pulling his baseball cap over his eyes. Maybe we are the same after all. This somehow makes him feel worse. But suddenly, from nowhere, a new thought enters his mind, beyond the pain and sorrow and hopelessness. A realization.

The Perfect Day wasn't really 'perfect.' Jim now remembers the silence in the car on the drive home. How he really had felt wrong about what had happened at the fire and all those times at the cleaning table, but had kept it down – clouded it with jokes and excuses. And so much anger. The loss of his children, his home, his life. All these memories, all these thoughts, all these regrets. Perhaps they had value. And if only he had listened to them closer, cared enough to take them in. His life might be different by now.

Jim thinks again. Maybe we aren't the same. Maybe I just need to try harder. Try to make my life better. He didn't deserve the family he had, but he wants to now. Jim starts the loud ignition of his semi – the sound of chains breaking. As he pulls out of

the lot and onto the highway, he says his final goodbye to Truck Stop. Leaving his shadow behind.