

The Lost Highway

by

L.A. Mitchell

Above the forgotten highway, where west Texas winds sculpted hot, liquid images against the baked asphalt, three vultures circled, emaciated and impatient. Their wings beat a clumsy rhythm, an impromptu death march punctuated by the occasional bottle-rocket cries of a nearby hawk. The three awaited the parched remains of Rye Dalton. Not yet dead in the physical sense—far from it—but in the truest sense of all that mattered.

Sweat plunged between Rye's shoulder blades, seeking escape from his overheated skin in the cotton fibers of his T-shirt. For three miles he'd pushed his scrap-heap motorcycle past outdated mile posts and hollowed-out pump stations with empty promises of fuel. At mile marker 217, four hundred miles from his destination, the Silver Spur Gas-N-Go materialized from a shifting mirage. An enormous cowboy hat, large enough to take flight in a dust devil, perched atop the sagging roofline.

Rye heaved his bike the final stretch to a mecca of shade over the pumps and thrust his foot against the rusted kickstand hard enough to break it. He sagged against the crumbling storefront. A gnat buzzed in the heat of his exhale and landed on his cheek, an unwelcome enemy snared on his flypaper skin.

He checked his watch. *Damn it.*

Muscles in his neck and shoulders hardened, roasted from pushing the two hundred pound pile of junk he should have abandoned long before his fuel line broke. Long before her exotic scent disappeared and all that remained were the memories of her straddled against his backside, racing the mistakes they longed to leave in a dust trail.

A steady hush, stronger than the wind curling through his ears, strengthened. He fished an old bus ticket from his front pocket—every number, every detail—as faded and smooth as a wish stone.

The noise, louder now, came from the direction he'd just traveled. South.

His lethargic gaze traced the dotted curves of the date

stamp, and he became lost in the vast canyon between then and now until the darker memories coiled like a diamondback rattler. A sudden gust lifted the paper and carried it, leaving four quarters and a wad of lint to the mercy of the blast-furnace winds.

He scrambled after the crinkled stub, gravel puncturing the worn denim across his knees, and captured it at the base of a wild fescue. His hope of finding her again, as he once had, restored to the safety of his pocket, he realized the sound was an approaching car.

White. Almost invisible through the heat cloud had the cherry-red vinyl seats not harnessed the glaring sun. The classic, rocket-shaped convertible crawled along the fractured road. Fast enough to know the '59 Thunderbird still ran. Slow enough for him to absorb the driver within.

A woman. Thick, blond hair snaked beneath a gauzy, patterned scarf. Tied beneath her chin, its triangular point snapped in the breeze like a flag in a presidential motorcade. Jeweled, almond-shaped sunglasses concealed most of her face. Doo-wap music blared from the car's speakers.

Perfect. Fifty miles from civilization, and he was about to be rescued by Doris Day.

Rye dodged the gas pumps and broke into a run. His sweat-soaked jeans cinched his thighs like a wet blanket clinging to a drowning man.

"Hey!" He waved his arms above his head, a universal distress call masked by exhausted panic, and charged the road. "Hey, wait!"

White-walled tires, rims mirroring the late afternoon sun, continued to eat the highway at a steady clip. The woman's face stayed centered on the road ahead, her brow creased. Her teeth, as white and straight as the path she carved through the desolate landscape, sank into a pillow of electric red lipstick.

Words from the song reached a crescendo and faded.

...just a lonely boy, lonely and blue, I'm all alone...

Rye stormed the faded yellow line at the road's center and entered a choking nest of exhaust. Four round taillights and a glistening boomerang emblem dissolved in the stifling heat.

"You blind, lady?" He raised his sleeve to his face and wiped away a fresh layer of sweat. "Christ!"

The Lost Highway

Three winged shadows eclipsed the sun, circling him in a halo as tight as chalk marks around a cadaver.

He growled at the buzzards, an animalistic release of everything that had gone wrong to this point. This road. This moment in time. He'd found the crossroads—that intangible instant where a decision comes on with such gravity, it has the power to alter the course of a lifetime—and he'd slipped a half day behind schedule. He had to make it.

Rye plucked the quarters from his palm. His boots scraped the gravel as he approached the storefront. No sign of life other than a few scavengers with exoskeletons and hairless tails. Through the window, a soda machine panel illuminated the dusky shadows.

“Bingo.”

His tongue squeezed the remaining moisture from his body in anticipation. The ground yielded no forced-entry weapon to shatter the door's glass, so he trekked to his bike and retrieved his leather jacket. One punch added a B&E to his stale criminal record.

Eight ounces of sugary cola and one long overdue leak later, he'd scrounged for enough rubber tubing to MacGyver his way to the next town. He planted his sore backside on the ground beside the bike and flicked his switchblade to cut the old line.

A song, plucky and dismal, drifted into his awareness.

... in the world's come over you?...

Gravel popped a car's undercarriage. Rye squinted into the bright sun. The v-shaped chrome emblem on the convertible's passenger door lured his gaze. He wiped the fuel dripping from his fingertips against his jeans and stood.

The woman navigated the mint-condition, wing-tipped boat to a stop behind his bike, its idling engine as commanding as a battleship on a desert ocean. She turned toward him, but offered no words.

“Feelin' guilty?” he asked.

“Help me. Please.”

Her words escaped in hushed tones, as if she were letting him in on some grand conspiracy. The absurdity of it all—the car, her get-up, the music—evaporated the instant he zeroed in on the way her full lower lip quivered.

He sidestepped a few inches to where the roofline blocked the sun, but her ridiculous glasses and scarf concealed most of

her face. "What's wrong?"

"I've lost my way."

"Where you headed?"

"Rock Springs Gulch." She plucked her glasses from her face. A line matching the slant of the lenses divided sunburned cheeks from a tired mixture of pale skin and smeared makeup. "I must have taken a wrong turn."

"Rock Springs," he echoed, more to recover from the distraction of her appearance than to internalize her destination. He'd expected to see the wrinkled face of a baby boomer re-living her youth. Instead, his gaze navigated the flawless skin of a vibrant young woman. "Got a map?"

She blinked as if he'd asked her to hand over her purse at gunpoint, then leaned across the console to the mirrored glove box. The movement cinched her fitted yellow sundress across her full breasts—torpedo shaped, like the T.V. moms from the fifties.

Her shaking fingertips, long and unadorned, crawled through the compartment, spilling papers onto the car's immaculate red floorboard. The stagnate summer air stirred and brought with it the heady scent of flowers. Rain, maybe, to a parched land.

"No map," she confessed.

Her gaze lifted. Reluctantly. He could feel it. Every meticulous inch of how he must have looked—a vagrant, a thief, a man on the edge of hope—until her bluebonnet eyes paused, and she took in more than just his own stare. She captured his breath. Against the harsh land pressing down on them like an immovable force, the gentle curve of her eyelids and the deep blue oasis beyond made him forget. His hard luck. The broken bike. All of it.

He remembered the ticket stub in his pocket and bit the inside of his cheek to punish himself for forgetting what he'd driven all night to do.

As if bound by some ancient rule of propriety, she broke the connection first. Her gaze sought something safer. Less intense. He glanced over his shoulder, in the direction her attention had wandered, to the pay phone at the corner of the building. The receiver, strangled by a glistening metal cord, swayed like a pendulum.

"Phone's dead. Already tried it." Rye glanced up. Behind the drop-cloth haze, the sun had slipped lower on the horizon.

“What’s in Rock Springs, if you don’t mind me askin’?”

“I’m late. I’m supposed to meet someone.”

Maybe it was the way she took a sudden interest in what lay beyond him or her sweet scent; he knew without a doubt that someone was a man.

“Stay here. I’ll get you a map, Ms...,” he drawled expectantly.

“Eve.”

Damned if she didn’t have the most forbidden name to go along with the Thunderbird’s apple red interior and her full, flushed lips. The breeze stirred. A blond strand escaped the scarf at her temple and curled around one of a dozen transparent yellow roses crowding the sheer fabric. Rye remembered being fourteen on a blanket in a meadow, the girl-next-door’s blond hair spilled across his barely-there bicep.

He started toward the building.

“You didn’t tell me your name.”

Rye paused and turned. He stared at the clean, manicured fingertips she held poised in the air between them. From the back pocket of his jeans, he unhooked his greasy hand and grasped hers. “Rye Dalton.”

He expected her hand to slip away, a reflex against his viscous grip, but her hold strengthened.

“You’re real.”

“Scuse me?”

“Nothing. It’s crazy. It’s just...”

In the heavy pause, she dangled between reluctance and confession. He became convinced the heat had taken hold of her mind.

“I was hoping you were a dream—that this, was all a dream. A nightmare, really.”

“Ms. Eve, I’ve never been anyone’s dream.” He glanced at the striped pink hat box in the backseat, the monogrammed initial E sandwiched between an N and W. New. “I’ll get you that map.”

Her soft hand slipped away. Lips, once unsteady and trembling, parted to speak, then closed as if nothing more could be said. Somewhere in Rock Springs, she’d find what she was looking for. Escape whatever nightmare had seized her. And somewhere, at a bus stop along the Atlanta to L.A. run, he’d find the woman he’d lost and make everything right

again.

Inside the abandoned store, he rifled through greeting cards with gnawed edges and Texas-shaped souvenirs. His gaze stopped on a vinyl photo sleeve, packed with random snapshots of people who looked like they'd found the secret to eternal happiness. He considered swiping one, keeping the stranger's pictures because he had no more of his own, but he'd never been one to steal much of anything. The empty slots would disturb him more than never learning life's greatest secret, anyway.

Rye glanced up. Through the window's brown film, he watched the woman take a drag from a slim cigarette and pace the length of the gas pump island.

Beneath a fallen turnstile of baseball caps, Rye uncovered a state map—a paper bribe, not of money, but direction. One map, faded from years of direct sunlight, in exchange for a retro-theme park ride, complete with a melodramatic actress, to the nearest civilization.

He unfolded the crisp panels and zeroed in on the blue arteries and the vast expanse of white between towns. Different from the nervous spread dotting the eastern half of the state. Five years ago, had she felt it, too? His only love's infectious, gypsy impulses, drained away in the quiet, isolated void.

He studied the map on his way out the door, his eyes scanning for key words. "I don't see a Rock..."

Tires squealed in a wide arc against the pavement. He glanced up and saw the convertible, a white blur of tethered scarf and cherry-red seats and lips headed north. His last, best chance of making it to Dallas on time. Gone.

Rye charged his bike and slammed his boot sole against the engine. "Son-of-a—" The rusted heap fell to the dirt, his curse swallowed in the crash of metal. Every derogatory female name fired through his mind, but none of them categorized the woman he'd just encountered. Insane, maybe, but something about her defied his usual reaction to being screwed.

Above him, the three forager's naked heads glazed orange in the waning daylight.

He righted his bike and resumed the task of splicing the hose he'd found behind the soda machine. Stars bubbled to the surface of the deepening sky. The first hint of temperate

The Lost Highway

night air filled his lungs and his anger subsided, replaced with thoughts of yellow roses. Ripe lips. Torpedoes.

Fuel line secured, Rye re-capped a metal gas can and stashed it beside a van on cinder blocks around back. In the twenty minutes that had passed, he'd looked up expectantly more than once, not at any one sound or instinct, but from a dismal place he couldn't understand.

He told himself he had no interest in who Eve was, what might be waiting for her in Rock Springs, or why she chose to travel this deserted highway alone, like some kind of reincarnation of a squeaky-clean era, long dead.

His only possessions secured firmly in his pack, he stared down at the faded map, fluttering beneath his front tire. He suppressed the urge to grab it. Search for Rock Springs one last time. In the map's folds, he might find evidence of smeared ink; or maybe, the town had simply fallen into the same white void, hell-bent on causing heartache to anyone who dared visit.

Rye reached into his pocket. Beside his lone ignition key lay the ticket he'd used to board a Greyhound bound for Vegas five years earlier. Instead of the fast money he needed, he'd found a familiar face, a willing spirit and a boyhood love that had never dimmed.

He mounted his bike and turned the key. One hundred and fifty horsepower shuddered beneath him, weakened from the day he'd driven it off the show-room floor. Tired, maybe, from chasing something down the road that never seemed to materialize from the dream-like haze.

The throttle's black teeth sank into his slick palms. He double-checked his makeshift hose, focused on the glowing line where earth met sky, and laid a thin trail of fresh rubber at mile marker 217, determined to steal back every stretch of ground he'd lost.

Rye's yellow headlamp snared a bright object a quarter of a mile away.

White.

Before he could make out the red-orbed taillights floating in the darkness or the chrome-tipped fins anchoring the bull's eye spare tire case, he saw her.

Old fashioned white shoes, pumped to a modest height, stirred against the black pavement. He savored every inch of

her shapely calves, the breeze kicking the knee-length hemline of her sundress to a disappointing elevation. The word on her hatbox came to mind. New. Her legs were definitely a new development, a distraction from his encroaching guilt.

He didn't want to stop. Couldn't stop. He'd traveled the desperate, bizarre detour with her already. Pride straightened his posture in the seat. She'd given him the polite, 50's version of the middle finger when she'd abandoned him at the station. The present-day's version itched to be released in his seventy mile per hour wake as it rearranged her matronly wardrobe. Torpedo, baby.

But the heavens conspired, pressing the night into his consciousness. The void encroached and became the third traveler on the lost highway in a battle of wills. He caught Eve's movement, a hand swiping her cheek, as she leaned against the driver's side door, scarf gone. His grip eased on the throttle.

What if his bike wouldn't start again?

His eyelids slid closed. The engine vibrated the seat between his thighs. A sickening feeling stirred through every pulsing muscle. Vertigo, maybe. Shadowy thoughts raced to the next possible traveler. What if he were a psychopath with a preoccupation for gutting women?

The thunder beneath Rye subsided as he opened his eyes. Admitted defeat in a standoff with a crying woman. Five minutes, tops. Then, he'd go.

Close enough now to see the tension fade from her face, her lips spread to an almost-smile, Rye edged his bike from the blacktop and rolled to a stop behind the convertible. His headlamp's lone eye illuminated her black and white license plate. Texas. 1960. An original—like the ones hanging over the smoke pit of every barbecue dive south of the Red River.

Odd, how every detail fit into her carefully-crafted display.

He reached for the ignition key, his fingers poised on its wide base while he reconsidered killing the engine. Then she was before him, her faded red lips moving with the rhythm of her body, her words buried beneath the bike's growl. Hearing her voice, the melody of its subtle, innocent rise, became a temptation he could no longer resist. He turned the key.

The motor stuttered and silenced, snuffed out by a

chorus of night creatures crowding the brush. Filling the white void.

"I'm never going to get there." No anger. Just a statement. Detached. Relieved, maybe.

"You took off."

"I told you, I'm late. The day's almost over."

"Won't they come looking for you?"

"Who?"

"Whoever you're supposed to meet."

Eve turned and retreated, closer to the Thunderbird, as if its dashboard glow and hypnotic music housed a slow, magnetic pull. Somehow, he couldn't picture her without the car.

"We've never seen each other. If I don't find my way to the covered bridge at Rock Springs, it'll all be for nothing." She glanced down. Her fingers threaded and tightened into a white-knuckled fist. "I could look like a million other girls."

"Not around here."

Eve glanced over her shoulder. One golden curl teased her collar. Never quite making eye contact, she looked like a World War II pin-up girl tossing well-wishes to troops ready to charge into combat. Her smooth cheeks flushed red, not from any sunburn or the haunting glow of taillights, but as a direct result of what she must have believed was a compliment.

His heart lightened, relieved she never had to know what he'd meant. A freak.

He climbed from the seat. Blood surged through his rigid muscles. "It's late. You should find a safe place for the night."

"I have to find it before midnight." She smacked her ankle, then scraped her nails along the silky nylons covering her calves. A nearby cricket's shrill protest grew louder.

"That town you're looking for? Must have the name wrong. Rock Springs doesn't exist on the map."

"That's impossible. My father spoke of it many times."

"Where're you from?"

"The coast. Near Galveston."

"Why drive all this way for someone you've never met?"

She glanced up the road, the direction she'd headed before something—some truth or fear—had stopped her, but offered nothing.

"You're right. It's not my business." He raised his hands

in surrender. “None of this is.”

“You’ll think it’s strange.”

No more than a flighty woman living in a past not her own.

“You may laugh.”

Rye approached the car’s left fin and gave into the temptation to run his palm along its sleek length. “Try me.”

“It’s a pact, really. Between friends. On graduation night, we found a box of photographs in the attic that belonged to my father. He was a traveling salesman—household cleaners. He took pictures at every stop to prove he was a trustworthy employee.”

Eve leaned against the car beside him, close enough to stir the air near his arm. Rye tried to remember the name of the white blossom that bloomed at night.

“We each drew a snapshot from the box and made a declaration. If we hadn’t found true love in exactly one year—to the day—we’d go to the place in our photo. Right there, waiting for us, we’d find it.”

An energy permeated her from within. A contagious optimism so alien to him, so hard to pull off, it had to be genuine.

“A childish game, really.”

“And yet, you’re here.” Rye shifted and slid his hands into his front pockets. The ticket stub settled near his right thumb. He withdrew his hand.

“So I am.” Her gaze skittered to the security of the crescent moon. “What do you know about true love, Mr. Dalton?”

“Enough to know you won’t find it at the end of this godforsaken stretch of land or any other. No matter how close you come, it always outdistances you.”

“How very cynical. You must have had your heart broken by someone you loved very much.”

He didn’t know what to say. How had his humanitarian gesture ended up on ground too raw to explore? He cleared his throat and muttered, “Still have the photo?”

“Yes,” she whispered, but her gaze lingered on his face, his lips, as if the abrupt shift in topic had left her behind.

A smile slipped past his resolve to remain disconnected. “Can I see it?”

“Oh.” She turned and plucked a curved photo sandwiched

between the parking brake and the dashboard's chrome lining. The white undergarment that caused her skirt to balloon out slipped into view. Her heel rose from the pavement. Very Doris Day. "Here it is."

She presented the snapshot, a touchstone of hope he dared not crush, and moved closer, bringing with her the unmistakable pull of the night, the soft crooning of a man's voice from the radio and the intoxicating nearness of a beautiful, genuine spirit.

For a moment, he stared at the photo in the light of his bike's headlamp, unable to see anything but the sway of her pearl-drop earring. The contemplative turn of her head as she studied its subject matter.

"Do you see..." Her enthusiastic words stalled in the realization that he studied her instead. "... anything?"

He recovered a breath too late. The disturbing tide of guilt returned—not for considering leaving her behind, but for forgetting what lay ahead. Hours ago, he'd thought of nothing but his gypsy love on a west-bound trip. Now, the girl—barely a woman—whose shoulder brushed his own, who'd materialized in the shifting mirage of empty space in the unforgiving west Texas landscape, left him craving more.

His mind absorbed the photo's image. Red cedar lay in generous planks, vaulted against the stark background. Live oaks twisted in the purple and orange layers of a heat-charged sunset on the plains. On the photo's padded white border, someone had written *Rock Springs Gulch—1951*.

The D.J.'s voice broke into his thoughts. "Here's a brand new track from Elvis Presley. Enjoy."

The song's pulsing, Latin rhythm lifted into the star-filled night.

...It's now or never. Come hold me tight...

A knot formed in Rye's stomach, the disconnectedness between rational and crazy as disarming as her fragrance. "Impossible."

"What's impossible?" Eve asked.

Rye stared at the radio, its red needle severing the otherworldly glow at a number near one hundred. He remembered four white crosses beside the road, decayed with time. He pictured flames rising from the red slats. The death of a small town in the aftermath of a tragedy. His stomach churned at the memory of staring out the back of his family's

station wagon at the charred remains of a bridge at the base of a creek bed.

“Do you know this place?”

“I’ve heard of it. It’s a legend in this area.”

“Really?” Eve’s face bloomed in a spectacular display of perfect teeth and glistening eyes.

... My heart was captured, my soul surrendered...

The hot, liquid sculpture took shape. Her old-fashioned mannerisms, her reserved innocence, her optimism, blended into the picture of a woman who’d set off in search of love and become lost along the way.

Just as he had.

Rye dismissed the ridiculous notion that the Thunderbird somehow carried her to a destination not of her own time, but of his.

“Out on Highway 71.” He’d been what, ten, when he’d seen the road closed sign? The painful clutch in his gut eased when he realized she couldn’t have been one of the four victims.

“Can you give me directions?”

“Be hard to find now.”

She bounded close and slipped her delicate hand around his. A simple, unguarded gesture that weakened his knees. “Will you take me there?” she whispered.

... For who knows when, we’ll meet again this way...

Rye stepped back, summoning images of a blanket in a meadow. Arms wrapped around his leather jacket, the vibration of the bike the only force strong enough to slip between him and the woman he’d loved.

“Turnoff’s down the road, ‘bout thirty miles. Can’t miss it.”

Eve’s long, dark eyelashes lowered to rest upon her apple-red cheeks. An exhale, warm and smoky, brushed his neck and entered the night slowly. Unsteady. Her hand slipped away. “All right.”

Gravel crunched beneath her white heels. She opened the convertible’s massive door and slipped into the seat, blond curls cascading down her back. As perfect there as she’d ever been.

A sense of finality swept over him, as acute as the loss of her touch against his skin. Somehow he knew the snapshot of her driving away would be his last glimpse. Another regret to

fill the void.

...Tomorrow will be too late. It's now or never...

Eve turned the ignition. The engine's deep revolutions overpowered the night.

The harder Rye tried to reconstruct his memories into a living, breathing conviction that he was doing the right thing, the more they scattered like dried wheat. A wish he could never get back.

She wrapped her hand around the gearshift and tugged.

"Wait," Rye shouted.

Red taillights glared against his faded jeans. The convertible's front end nosed down.

He circled the car, closer now to the passenger's side.

"When, exactly, was your graduation?"

"Why, last year." Eve's perfectly-shaped brows distorted. "Weren't you listening?"

Rye battled what felt like a sagebrush lodged in his throat. "1959?"

"Yes," she said, as if it were the most obvious answer in the world.

He thought of a handful of ways to tell her the photograph was more than fifty years old. That she'd driven, not to the destination of some childish game, but to an unexplainable place far beyond what she had bargained for. The memory of her quivering lip returned. Her fear, and his capacity to make her forget. All of it.

Rye wrapped his heated palm around the cool, chrome door handle.

He glanced at his bike. Corroded. Broken. He slipped his other hand into his pocket, the inertia of what he'd wanted for so long and the worn softness of the ticket stub conspiring to sway his decision. The gravity of his choice weighted his tired feet like shackles connecting his boots.

Two roads converged on a lost highway. One, the same tired road of self-doubt he'd traveled each day since love had left him behind. The other, an unknown filled with possibilities. Neither a guarantee of eternal happiness.

The wind shifted and brought with it the scent of night flowers. Rain. New horizons. And he knew he needed to believe in something as much as the unforgettable woman before him.

"I'll take you."

He opened the door and sank into the smooth vinyl, as supple as a woman's skin. A quick pinch of his watch buttons illuminated the readout.

11:40.

"How long will it take to get there?" she asked, the same captivated stare he'd witnessed earlier fixed on his timepiece.

"Twenty minutes, if you floor it."

Eve's face, illuminated as much from within as from the moonlight spilling down over the canopy of night, softened, her hope-filled smile an answer to his own.

At mile marker 190, where the wind snatched away his faded ticket, a sacrifice to the void that had brought them together, the '59 Thunderbird joined the highway headed south.

The Lost Highway

“Lonely Boy.” Songwriters Paul Anka and Joe Dowell.
Recorded by Paul Anka (1959)

“What in the World’s Come Over You.” Songwriter
Giovanni Scafone Jr. Recorded by Jack Scott (1960)

“It’s Now or Never.” Songwriters Aaron Schroeder and
Wally Gold. Recorded by Elvis Presley (1960)