

The Fifth Element

DAVID BOSWORTH

EARLY AUGUST long ago and, thumb out again, I was on the road—this time in rural New Mexico, two thousand miles away from home. On me: a child-sized backpack and an odd sort of jacket, thin and torn and designed by a tailor with the instincts of a hoarder, whose abundance of pockets I used for extra storage. In them then: a pad, a pen, a piece of stale bread, the four dollars or so that I had left, and a tiny pack of peanuts from a vending machine back in Barstow, California. Stupidly, though hitching through the desert in the dead of summer, I carried no canteen, nor any maps to show me where I was or planned to be. I barely *had* a plan, vaguely on my way to a war protest fifteen hundred miles away, in a city where I knew exactly no one and had no place to stay.

(Just to be clear from the start: this isn't going to be an inspiring story about hardships endured or overcome, though it may be one about apprenticeships joined. My family wasn't brutal, broken, or tragically poor; too discreet to get caught, I hadn't been tossed from my parents' modest home for the Schedule 1 drugs I sometimes took; nor, to voice a boilerplate complaint, did I consider myself "misunderstood"—at least not any more than most of us are by the people we live with and want to love. I didn't *have* to be there, hungry and alone, unbathed for weeks, hoping for a ride in the empty countryside, shocked to find the desert could be freezing cold at night. I wasn't fleeing *from* but running *toward*. Toward what? . . . Well, I never was quite sure, as I suffered then, and still do now, from a restless need to know that borders on lust.)

With nowhere to be, I didn't measure my time then by hours or miles but by the kinds of rides I happened to receive, the social transaction each required. To hitch was to beg. What I wanted was clear, not a dollar but a lift. Why the driver stopped, what he wanted from me, *that* was the variable that torqued the script.

The bored, the tired who borrowed my company to pass the time or keep them awake. The disappointed cruisers who hoped that I would be the beardless but horny Bambi of their dreams. The nostalgically kind who thought they saw in me something of themselves when they were eighteen, a very rough draft of a human being before the usual collusion of choice and chance had calcified their lives into the fist of a one-and-done fate. And then there were the frustrated, freelance professors who needed a captive audience to lecture—on sports, on politics, on the conspiracy against their chances for success; in one notable instance, dismissing three hundred years of chemistry and physics, on “the four elements of the universe.” As of that night, while on my aimless passage through our shared domain of earth, air, water, and fire, I’d yet to hitch a ride with someone truly dangerous—though that would soon change.

According to the unwritten rules of the road, which resembled those of a twelve-step program, full names were almost never disclosed. Drivers wanted to be heard. Whether to boast, explain, lament, or disdain, they had something to say; they wanted an audience to hear their take on some portion of their short-lived stay on this earth. And so I listened; in return for a lift, I offered each driver my total attention. For forty miles or fifty minutes on the bench seat beside him, I became the witness to one man’s existence: a make-do confessor who—without the wisdom to assess, the chance to intervene, or the power to forgive—would never be seen by him again.

Sometimes, though, as on that night in New Mexico, it seemed that solitude was what I was really seeking—the trial of its silence, the ultimate test of what to think and do in the absence of social roles and cues. It was past two a.m. and I was in the midst of a beggar’s epiphany then. Standing on the shoulder of a carless road, without money or company or a plan for my life—without, it seemed, much hope for a ride—I felt less abandoned than oddly at home in that parched and peopleless stretch of the world.

There were no buildings there, no borders; my mind felt as empty and clear as the dry desert air, my heart as wide as the space around me, its lunar landscape stripped clean of anything soft, anything

green, all stones and dust and low-lying scrub whose stunted limbs had long gone leafless. One massive mesa waited in the distance, a starlit monument to no man's achievements. My irrelevance to the universe had never felt so obvious yet seemed to hold the hint of a private promise. I had the teasing sense that if I stayed there long enough, my desiccated flesh would fall away, and that, freed of all its weight and pain, I could rise above our agonistic sphere of earth, air, water, and fire to hover in the haven of the pure night sky, a new and nameless constellation.

But then, swerving to a stop, humanity dropped in to take me for a ride.



As soon as he spoke, I could tell that the driver—blond and young, with a tight white T-shirt that glowed in the dark—was completely incoherent, two time zones beyond legally drunk. Before I could back out, though, his car shot off in a poisonous plume of rubber-singed smoke. Soon it was careening from side to side, catching one lip of the curbless road, then lurching to the other, pinballing me, as if I were trapped in some carnival ride gone off its rails, between the dash, my door, and the body of the driver.

I quickly suggested that I “wouldn't mind” if he pulled over and “took a rest”: that is, stopped the damned car before he passed out and flipped the fucker, crushing its roof and killing us both. When that failed, I improvised a lie. I said I was sleepy and, faking a yawn, hurled myself awkwardly onto the backseat, where, in lieu of the seatbelts that didn't yet exist, I assumed a fetal position, arms wrapped around my precious, if reckless, teenage head. That tactic seemed to work, for the driver soon pulled off the road and nodded out himself.

Shy, he didn't say much when we woke up at sunrise, not until he stopped at the first convenience store, intent on buying—why was I surprised?—two six-packs of Coors. After I declined his mute offer of one, he popped a top and, lurching out of silence, began talking and drinking nonstop. He was an army medic who had been back from Vietnam for about a month, and, after a road trip with a lover, he

was returning now to his nameless hometown in the Texas Panhandle. Discerning even that simple summary, however, took some strenuous decoding. For the Medic thought and spoke just as he'd driven the night before, swerving from side to side, from one near catastrophe in his life to another—a chaotic ride borne on riptides of rage, jealousy, grief, and fear.

The war, the boys he saved on the battlefield, the ones he didn't, the asshole lieutenant who sent their platoon on suicidal missions. At one point, slipping into show-and-tell mode, he pulled a military medal out of his shirt pocket—a Purple Heart, he said—and held it in the air for us to consider. His own expression, though, was soon contorting against itself, wavering, it seemed, between tentative pride and visceral revulsion, as if the medal were an altogether other kind of trophy: an ear he'd cut off, or some silver-filled molar yanked from the jaw of a peasant soldier. The pause didn't last long, for the sight of that medal reminded him of someone else's wounds, a friend he'd found impaled on punji sticks—the booby trap slicked, he wanted me to know, with human shit to make it infectious. But no, no, *that* case was too awful to recall, and so he lurched again in a wholly new direction, toward the rococo disaster of his stateside life.

He kept ranting about some “fucking-little-bitch Marie,” contrasting her with a woman called Dorothy. Dorothy had bought him this ring, Dorothy had paid for their motel and all their food and drinks when they were staying somewhere—Nevada, I think. (Surely not Kansas—she wasn't *that* Dorothy.) Soon, the Medic was pointing to a picture postcard he'd purchased there, as if to confirm for himself as well as me that his recent trip was not some fantasy induced by too much beer. Dorothy wasn't *Debra* though—no, Debra was the one who'd been beaten up in *another* motel by a “Seattle hippie.” And then I was given this perplexing clue: Dorothy had kicked Marie, that fucking-little-bitch, out of their house. . . . but how could that be?

My head ached from the chaos of the Medic's pell-mell confessional. I felt faintly as I did when hearing my grandma refer to our

myriad relatives once and twice removed, but the cousindom of this confusion weren't generations of Methodists squaring their accounts with a just God. Dorothy had been angry, Dorothy had thrown the fucking-little-bitch out of their house—*their* house? But if so, that might mean...

I put it together slowly. I drew a little graph in my mind. Debra, apparently, was the Medic's sister, who after shacking up in a Seattle motel with a hippie had been beaten up by him. Marie was the fucking-little-bitch he'd married at sixteen, whom *he* was going to beat for shacking up with someone unknown, unnamed, while he was overseas. And Dorothy—she was the tough one, the Rosetta stone, the key—and Dorothy with whom *he* had been shacking up in that Nevada motel, she, it seemed, was Marie's... *mother*? Was that even possible, David?

The juvenile jokester in me, trying to mask my actual shock, made an effort to mock the soap-operatic excess of it all. (Shacking up with Marie's *mother*? *Why that makes your driver a bona fide...*) But I couldn't laugh, not even for a moment on the safe inside, not when the car was swamped with so much pain, wave after wave.

My driver made no sense at all, everything was a contradiction. He loved Marie but was going to beat her up. He hated hippies but—*hey, fuckin' A*—they were right about the war. They were right the war sucked, and yet, the Medic soon revealed to my astonishment, he had reupped and was going back to Vietnam in just one month—back to the officers he loathed, to shit-slicked sticks and mine-mangled limbs, more comrades and friends dying in his arms.

Utterly exposed, his whole heart and soul were twitching then in some agonizing arrhythmia of guilt and rage. Nor were these narrative fragments from the war that cut like shrapnel even the worst of it. At unpredictable moments, the Medic would weep suddenly—not tear up but weep in brief but violent bursts, grand mal seizures of emotional release. They struck me like a shock wave from some invisible grenade: I had never seen a grown man weep before. His grief would surge out not only through his eyes and mouth; his whole

body convulsed, as if giving birth to his misbegotten past in clenching contractions.

His big blond moon of a face would flex, his lids squeezing half-shut. As his words gushed out, his hairless hands, holding a beer and the steering wheel, would clench or cramp, denting each can before it was emptied, and I couldn't help but think then—these hands were inside the guts of a boy my age just last month. When one turned a splotchy red from squeezing the steering wheel, I could almost see the blood from the wounds that he'd stitched up. And when he sobbed, it was as if they were the final gasps of some buddy of his shredded on the battlefield—the real message he'd brought home from the war, so unlike the usual corny letters read aloud, to cloying soundtracks, in Hollywood films.

I got the message alright, but what could I do? Dab his brow like some VA nurse? He was the medic, but who would heal *him*? No wonder he was drinking at eight a.m. At one point I was so stressed, and so mentally fatigued from my hours on the road and trying to decode his unbearable story, that my eyes filled up, the way young kids' sometimes do out of sheer empathetic conformity.

In another age, a comrade of his, some flinty hero out of Conrad who adhered to the soldier's code of honor, might have shot him in the temple to end his agony. It wasn't until much later that I realized the obvious—that the Medic may have already thought of that solution, at least subliminally, reupping then to get himself killed, suicide by combat—if, that is, he didn't do it sooner, with me aboard, careening accidentally on purpose off the road and into a ravine.

That fear wouldn't fade, and soon enough I started downing beers myself, partly in self-defense, so he'd have fewer and lessen our chances of a fatal road wreck, and partly to soothe my own frayed nerves. As I drank, I barely said a word. Other than when he asked suspiciously if I were a hippie, and I said no, I revealed nothing about myself—which was easy to do because he showed no interest in my past or present life. And other than an ear to hear his dreadful story, what *was* I, anyway, compared to him? A piece of melba toast. A diet

cracker when set against his rotting-meat mess of a life. In lieu of anything helpful to say, I nodded periodically and let out little affirmative grunts, as if I were some therapist in training.

Later, from the same magical pocket that held his scenic postcard and Purple Heart, the Medic produced a joint of legendary girth, then lit it up and offered me a toke—or so I thought. Already having conceded the tactical necessity of reducing his supply of intoxicants, I quickly accepted. That prudent move soon proved fruitless, though, when a second joint appeared. Apparently sharing one was a little too hippie-like for this Texan. Instead, we each would have our own: two millionaires, with fat Havanas in our hands, inhaling lazy tokes as we sluiced our way down this fabled road, the old Route 66, toward the bliss of oblivion.

“Killer dope,” he observed—though whether he was speaking as a consuming connoisseur or a medical pro, I couldn’t be sure.

“I hear you, man,” I said, my usual bullshit filler. But in a way I *did*. For while staring at that giant joint in my hand, I was trying to recall how many beers I’d already downed on an empty stomach, even as I sensed the ghosts of my parents, teetotalers both, frowning above me. Although I felt entirely innocent, a mere victim of circumstances, here I was, on that “slippery slope” and in the “bad company” that the apostles of sobriety forever warn against.

Soon, though, as the inner spaces of the car were steeped with dope, the problem became its own solution: my mood untethered, my worries gently leavened into froth. Outside, the New Mexican landscape was floating by, a picture show surreal almost in its vivid emptiness. Here was a preview, perhaps, of what the planet would be like once cleansed of humanity, its surfaces purged of punji sticks and cluster bombs, its winds no longer tainted by the din of all our voices—by our pleas to be seen, our rage to be heard. My epiphany revised, I imagined then the icy astringency of the pure night sky would soon descend to cauterize the earth.

That fantasy ended when I happened to spy, on the otherwise featureless side of the road, some wilting flowers beneath a tiny wooden

cross: a crude, now crumbling (but all the more touching) memorial of sorts. This must've been the spot where someone beloved, but deeply despondent or recklessly high, had flown off the road and ended it all, a thought that then posed a troubling question. Had the driver been alone, or did he too have a passenger with him?

I shook my head, trying to ground myself then and redirect my thoughts. But the motion only made me dizzy, my vision blurring, my brainpan swirling like some agitated snow globe with flurries of random images and words. This much at least had proven true: it *was* killer dope. A few more minutes must've passed before the spine of my mind was pinned to the mat and I seemed to forget where my lower limbs were.

But no amount of beer or weed could put the Medic's mind at ease, and soon he was ranting again, weeping too, about the war, the women, the hippies, the lieutenant. And given the waves of his pain, my drug-addled mind, and the simmering fear that I might die at any moment, the ride seemed to last about a half hour less than eternity.



The Medic had somehow taken to liking me, and so, as we were crossing into Texas, he announced that he would get me a free meal at his parents' restaurant—an offer that for various reasons, including my actual hunger, my lack of funds, my fear of saying no, and his promise that he wouldn't take me much out of my way, I passively accepted. Perhaps I thought it would be “interesting” to see where he came from. Perhaps I thought, “I owe him that much.” I'm not being sarcastic. I hadn't lived a life yet. I hadn't had a *normal* upbringing, I'd had a *happy* upbringing—which, I was learning quickly while on the road to Chicago, might be the most abnormal of all, and which, in any case, had left me uniquely unprepared for misery like this.

The Medic grew quiet, though, as he drew close to home, and as much as his monologue had upset me, I couldn't say that I liked this mood much better. His shoulders sagged, his moon of a head dropping lower by degrees. The jealous rage receded, a silent fear surging back in its wake—his fear, and so, too, mine. Paranoia set in—some

scenario involving the infamous Marie. We'd be holed up, the three of us alone in some stucco bungalow, surrounded by cops, one of whom (the only one he'd talk to) would be an old high-school buddy of his. The Medic would then produce his army-issued pistol, and to prove to the fucking-little-bitch that he meant business. . . *Cut it out, David!*

Texas, the Panhandle. What can I say? The land was *flat*—some Platonic ideal of omnipresent flatness. Flat streets, flat roofs, a flat and virtually featureless horizon. Flat, until, at last, we got out of the car, at which point flat was replaced by *hot*. The cloud of the man's pain had so filled the car that I'd forgotten it was air-conditioned. As we crossed the parking lot then of his parents' tiny hamburger stand, the hot tar there bubbled and popped beneath our feet, like wads of gum between the sweet white teeth of flirting girls, an image revived from a safer phase of life that had passed him by.

Inside, we approached an older woman behind the counter who eyed me suspiciously, yea, even unto hostilely—was she concerned, too, that I might be a hippie?

“Ma,” the Medic said, “this is. . .”

Turning toward me, he paused, realizing only then that he didn't actually know who I was, not even my first name. And he seemed to notice, too, for the first time, while viewing me through his mother's eyes, my essential grunginess from so many showerless days on the road.

“He's a friend,” he finally said, a generous gesture, then added with a shrug: “I promised him lunch.”

The place was empty, even at noon. Directing me, the Medic pointed to the counter stool nearest the door. After I sat there, he made sure to move as far away as possible, the very last stool, and so I knew that we *both* knew that it had been a mistake to invite me home. But the cook, a small and wiry black man, desperate perhaps for something to do, had already thrown a patty down, and as I heard it sizzling on the grill, I thought to myself, *how bad can it be?*—though whether I was referring to my extended stay in the Medic's company or the food to come was vague even to me.

As Mom slowly wiped the counter between them, more from nervous habit than actual need, she and her son began to talk. My “friend,” as nameless to me as I was to him, had shrunk even more, but despite his bowed head and deliberate mumbling, I could hear every word. He was asking about Marie. Had his mom seen her around town? Did she know where she lived now? Was the fucking-little-bitch seeing someone else? (Actually, a dutiful son, the Medic didn’t curse around his mom, but by then he had so trained me that I was filling in the blanks reflexively.)

His voice was strangely soft, its tone half-pleading. After all the ranting on our ride, the unchecked surges of grief and rage, the simmering violence, the Medic’s newly docile posture astounded me, and I realized suddenly that his obvious embarrassment was less about me than his own behavior—how “good” he had to be, or seem to be, when back at home. Impressed by his heroic attempt to appear sane and sober, I chose to honor the effort by staring straight ahead, pretending for him then that I either couldn’t hear or had no interest in what he was saying.

Instead, to distract myself, I studied the cook. It was hard to believe that they could afford an employee, but he did seem at home there, a skillful pro splitting my roll, swabbing each half with thick layers of oleo, like a master plasterer. He was wearing one of those white caps that health departments demand, but tilted in such a way as to defy not only its sanitary purpose (nearly all his salt-and-pepper hair was exposed), but gravity itself: the sort of tacit fuck you to the regulations of the powerful that the serfs of this world are wont to stage. Still more than a little high, I was fascinated by it, not just the political point but the physical fact. The Mr. Wizard in me wanted to know: why didn’t it fall off?

Those speculations ended when my meal was served, expertly, a plate sliding my way with the rapid ease and perfect placement of a Vegas dealer. The burger was small, steaming, its bun shiny with grease. A slice of pickle on the side was so thin I could actually see, through its circular lens, a web of tiny cracks in the plate’s glazing. I was eyeing the food queasily when the Medic’s dad walked in.

He too had a white T-shirt on, as did the cook—what was it, a family rule? Some Texas Panhandle uniform? You could tell right away who ran the show, the way everyone else rearranged themselves, suddenly aware of their positioning (its subtle codes and cues), fearing a misinterpretation might prove dangerous. Leaning down into the counter, the Medic grew smaller still, an act of virtual disappearance—where did all his old rage go? His mom moved to the side, allowing her man free access to him.

A long uneasy moment passed. As I had once empathetically shared the Medic's embarrassment, I now became afraid with him and for him, while all of us waited for the family's lord and master to finally speak.

"Hey, boy."

The Medic mumbled something back—this time so softly I didn't have to pretend that I couldn't hear him. I started eating rapidly just to appear busy.

"You *hear* from Debbie-girl?"

"Yessir."

"You *hear* what the hippie did to her? . . . *Did* you?"

"Yessir."

Rote confirmations were all that was permitted in *this* boot camp, apparently. Soon his dad started pacing behind the counter, puffing up as he went, back and forth, back and forth, like a teenage tough in a parking lot calling out some acned rival. And then, leaning forward over the counter: "I going to *kill* that son-of-a-bitch! I will beat the living shit out of that fucking hippie scumbag. You hear me, boy? I'm going up to Seattle to bust his druggie head, to tear him a second asshole, and before I'm done . . ."

At which point, the cook—looking almost bored but apparently on cue, as if he had played this role many times before—turned from his grill, and lightly grasped from behind the arms of his much larger boss, completing the charade of restraining him from pummeling a hippie who, oh so conveniently, was some fifteen hundred miles away.

My burger already wolfed down, I took advantage of the distraction to slip out the door. In the heat of their parking lot, I heaved a

sigh, relieved to be free of what seemed to be an unbearable mix of authentic pain and bogus manliness. But recalling my driver slumped on his stool, I couldn't help but feel a little guilty, too, as if I were deserting a buddy on the battlefield, one suffering from grievous wounds.

It soon became clear, however, as I asked directions at a gas station, that the Medic had misled me—he *had* driven me considerably out of my way. It was more than twenty miles back to the highway, and no one would stop to give me a ride. After three hours baking in the heat on the edge of town, I didn't even try. As penance, perhaps, I hiked the whole way. I walked through the night along the flat, flat road toward the promised highway, whose tantalizing glow, however far or fast I hiked, never seemed to draw much closer.

By the time I did arrive, there were almost no cars. With little hope for a ride and more than hungover in multiple ways, I tried to get some rest on the side of the road. Lying in the dirt, I wrapped myself around a flimsy shrub, the only refuge I could find, and then seemed to plunge into the depths of a dreamless sleep. Soon enough, though, with only that thin jacket to shield me from the cold, my own shivering woke me up.

I shifted on my back and lay there exposed, my shoulders clenching against the cold, a very rough draft of a human being waiting for the merciful sun to appear. Too sore to sit up then, I couldn't imagine even lifting a limb, much less rising into the haven of the pure night sky, whose stars above me, though crystal bright, had never seemed so far away. Every so often, a single car would shoot down the road, and the violence of its passing, as if shedding excess anger, would rattle the ground and shudder through me. Without any discernible start or end, the desert wind no longer seemed to cleanse the empty land around me; animate instead, it hurt and howled. The four elements of the universe had been joined by a fifth, the arid air and dirt there inextricably mixed with the voices of the living and the stories of the dead—with the moaning of that ghost whose makeshift cross had marked the fatal spot where he'd flown off the road, with the raging and the weeping of my temporary. . . friend.

Shivering in the cold two thousand miles from home, I knew that they were there, that they would always be there, if I chose to listen. If I kept to our bargain and, in return for my passage, offered them the gift of my total attention.