

THE REST STOP

John Boston

"I have to pee." said Alex.

"Seriously? It's like ten degrees outside," said Dale.

"That's perfectly normal for Montana. It's like this for six months straight."

"How does somebody exist in this kind of climate?"

"How does someone live in Phoenix in the summer when it's a hundred and twenty?"

"What if your pee freezes?"

"There's a rest stop in Mosby up ahead."

"You really got to go, huh?"

"Two cups of coffee and my bladder is ready to explode."

"Well, then I guess it's settled."

Dale pulled into the deserted rest stop parking lot. There were a few semis parked in the parking lot who were stopped for the evening. The building was well maintained, but Dale wasn't completely sold on it.

"Man, this is like a perfect setting for a serial killer."

"Come on. Just wait outside the door for me. I'll yell if I see a bad guy."

"Does someone clean these things? What if you find a dead hooker in one of the stalls?"

"I can't believe I'm banging you sometimes."

"I can't believe it either. I'm a very lucky man," he said and kissed her.

She kissed him back and walked into the women's room. Dale waited for her and leaned against the wall. He looked down at his watch. It was just after midnight.

"You alright in there?"

"Just fine," she replied.

He walked over to the vending machines and bought a soda. He walked back to the wall and waited for her to come out. After five minutes of waiting, he was beginning to get a little irritated.

"Alex, did you fall in?"

He didn't get a reply.

Maybe she really did fall in.

"Alex?" he said sticking his head inside the ladies' room.

"Alex?"

He waited another minute. He was getting upset. They had been on the road for over ten hours and he was exhausted. They were trying to get to a motel and stop for the night. That was easier said than done.

"Alex, I'm coming in," he said.

He stuck his head in the ladies' room and walked around. It was empty. Alex was nowhere to be found. Dale was now beginning to feel something else. Not nervous, not scared.....*something in between*. Like the seconds before you are about to sneeze.

"Alex? Come on, I'm tired," he said walking around the stalls. He opened all the stall doors. They were empty. Alex was not in the women's room.

So then, just where the hell was she?

There was only one way in and one way out. He tried pushing on the windows. No way could she have opened one and climbed out. He walked back outside to the car. His face and ears were stinging from the biting cold. She wasn't in the car either. He grabbed a hat from the car and put it on. He then walked around the building, sinking in the snow. He couldn't see any footprints in the fresh snow.

It seems that Alex just vanished into thin air.

He told himself to be calm. He told himself there has to be a perfectly logical explanation for all this. Maybe Alex decided to have a little fun with him. Most nights, that would be fine, but not tonight. Not when he's this tired.

He walked back inside the building and went into the women's room once more. What the hell had happened when he had his back turned? It couldn't have been more than fifteen seconds? Did someone sneak in there and grab her? Did she sneak out of the restroom? He figured if she did, he would have heard the main doors open. Unless she hid and waited for him to go into the women's room looking for her. The most pressing question at the moment was simply: *is Alex safe?*

No new vehicles had arrived in the rest area since they had gone inside the building. If someone had grabbed her, where had they gone? He called her phone once more, only to have it go to voicemail. He called and sent her a text, but got no response. Dale was irked and on the verge of panic. If this was her idea of a joke, he was going to beat her. This stopped being funny about half an hour ago. He was now very worried about her. He went into the men's room just to look around. It too was empty. He checked all the stalls. She wasn't in there either.

Just as he was about to dial 911, Alex walked out of the women's room.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked angrily

"Going to the bathroom."

"Don't give me that shit. I was in there half a dozen times and you weren't in there."

"Yeah, I was."

"Alex, it was 12:05 when you went in. It's now almost one o'clock. What the hell? Don't lie to me, I'm not in the mood." said Dale.

"Sorry, I guess I just lost track of the time?"

"You were gone for almost an hour? Where the hell were you?"

"I got a call from my sister. We were texting back and forth. I think she's going to leave her dude."

"Okay.....except, I checked every stall and you weren't in there."

"I came out and you were gone. I went back to the car and you weren't there either. I waited in the car for like half an hour. I saw you walking outside. If anything, I'm the one who should be mad at you." she said.

Dale couldn't help but notice that something about his wife seemed slightly off. she seemed darker and more tanned. Maybe it was the light or lack thereof. Her hair seemed different. Everything about her seemed different.

"Let's get going, I'm tired."

He followed her back to the car. Alex stopped. She had a strange look on her face when she saw herself in the mirror. It was as if she had never seen her reflection before.

They left the rest area and headed down the black abyss that was State Route 87. The roads in Montana were long and seemed to go forever. there wasn't much to look at. It was the size of California with barely a million people, most of which were in just a few cities along the front range of the Rockies. Eastern Montana had some of the most rural, desolate areas of the country. Somebody could disappear out here very easily. Alex put his hand over his.

"I'm sorry, I made you angry," she said. she had never apologized for anything she had done. It caught Dale off guard.

"It's fine. I'm just tired. It's been a long day."

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Huh?"

"Why are we on this road?"

"What do you mean? You chose the route? You said it was the fastest way to get to Great Falls."

"Right."

"What the hell happened in there Alex? I know you weren't in the bathroom or the car. It was cold when I started it."

"I told you. I waited for you in the car. I didn't have the keys. I couldn't start it."

"You sat in a cold car all this time, while I was panicking, thinking something had happened to you?"

"Yes."

"Alex, it was freezing in the car."

"I'm used to the cold. You aren't. This really is no big deal to me. I grew up in weather like this."

Dale drove for another hour. He knew he should pull over and get a few hours of sleep. He could barely keep his eyes open. If they went off the road out here, they were in big trouble. He hadn't even checked the spare tire to see if it was inflated. A blowout could spell disaster out here in God's country.

Alex kept her hand on his. She was rarely affectionate like this. The only time she ever showed any real affection was in the bedroom. Behind closed doors, it was a much different story.

The girl could be hard to contain.

"Look, I'm your husband. I think you owe it to me, to tell the truth. I'm going to ask you one more time: *what the hell happened in that women's room?*"

"Why can't men ever just let things go? Why do you always have to know the answer to everything? I don't think you have the answers to anything?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you ever wonder if there are other worlds, right next door to ours? Whole universes that are almost exactly like ours, just slightly different? In this universe, maybe you and I aren't married at all. Maybe we're strangers. *Maybe we can't stand one another.*" she said staring straight ahead.

"What does that have to do with you disappearing?"

"Maybe everything. Maybe you shouldn't be so narrow-minded. Maybe you should open your mind to the limitless possibilities the universe has to offer."

"Again, what does this have to do with what just happened back there?"

"What if the two worlds could touch, just briefly? I wonder what would happen?" she said.

She turned on the cab light for a second and Dale saw a tattoo on the back of her neck. He pulled the car over and came to a stop on the shoulder.

"When did you get that?" he asked

"What?"

"The giant tat on the back of your neck."

"Oh.....I got it a few days ago."

"You didn't have it before you went into the women's room."

"Of course I did."

"No, you did not. Who the hell are you?"

"Dale.....I got it on Tuesday. Dianne and Heather got them as well. It's something I've wanted to do for a while. I didn't tell you, because I knew you would react this way."

"You did not have that tattoo when we stopped."

"Of course I did. Why do you think I was wearing a scarf? I didn't want you to see it."

"I'm your husband. I'm not some Tinder Date you just met an hour ago. What were you thinking? Did you think I wasn't going to notice that you now have a giant tattoo on the back of your neck?"

"I wanted to surprise you."

"Well, *mission accomplished.*"

"Come on, don't be mad. You got to learn to lighten up. You take everything so seriously."

"You don't take things seriously enough. That's why you make twelve dollars an hour," said Dale.

"You're no fun."

"We all have to grow up at some point. I just never thought I would have to be the mature one in the relationship."

"Not mature.....just lame."

"So now I'm lame? Which one of us pays all the bills and keeps a roof over our heads? It ain't you."

"I pay bills. I help out."

"Alex.....aren't you tired of being poor? Don't you ever want more out of life than living in a single wide in the middle of nowhere? We had to save up for two years to be able to take this vacation. You don't even own a car."

"Might I remind you that I supported you for three years so you could get your nursing degree? I work at my job because I love the people and my boss. Do you know how rare it is to find a cool boss? It's like winning the lottery. I am helping people. Social workers don't make huge money."

"There's a motel up ahead in Grass Range. Let's stop there for the evening," said Dale.

They pulled into the truck stop and got a room. Alex didn't even seem to care about the condition of the room. Usually, she was a princess in regards to where she slept. They weren't in the room for more than a minute when Alex stripped completely naked. She jumped on the bed.

"Let's make a baby," she said.

"Huh?" said Dale, very confused.

"Knock me up. I know you can do it. I've seen you in action."

"You've told me repeatedly that you don't want any kids. You said you would never bring a child into this messed up, messed up world of ours. Those were your exact words."

"I changed my mind. Let's get pregnant with twins."

"I'm so tired, I don't even think I could achieve liftoff right now. Can we do it when I wake up? Pretty please?"

"Fine. I'm going out to grab a coke. Don't wait up for me."

"That won't be a problem," said Dale as his head hit the pillow. He heard her leave as she turned off the lights. He wanted to wait up for her, but he could barely keep his eyes open. He needed sleep. That was what mattered most at the moment. That was all that mattered at the moment. He would deal with his crazy wife as soon as he woke up.

Whenever that would be.

He opened his eyes and looked at his phone. It was almost eleven AM. He hadn't slept like this in years. Alex was nowhere to be found. She hadn't come back to the room. He got dressed and went out to the car. His keys were in the ignition. Alex's suitcase and bag were gone. He walked around the truck stop but found no trace of her. Alex had fled the scene. He walked back into the office and spoke with the guy working behind the desk.

"Have you seen my wife?" he asked, showing the clerk a picture of her on his phone.

"Yeah.....she was in here about six am. Asked me if there was a bus or train or something to get out of here. We have a bus service that runs twice a week, but it won't be here until tomorrow. Guess that wasn't what she wanted to hear.

"So, where did she go?"

"I don't know," he said.

Dale had enough. He called her sister who said she had heard nothing from her. He called her mother, who said the same thing. His last call was to the sheriff's dept. to report his wife missing.

Two deputies showed up at the truck stop about ten minutes later. One of them was named Latrell, he didn't get the other officer's name. He didn't say very much.

"What seems to be the problem?" asked Latrell.

"My wife went into the women's room and someone that looks like her, but isn't her, came out," said Dale.

He rehashed everything, from the beginning. He didn't want to leave anything out. the office clerk confirmed that she had been alive at six AM. He also confirmed that Dale's car had not moved since he pulled in about four AM. The longer his story went on, he could tell the deputies were skeptical, but the fact that his car had not moved kind of ruled out any foul play. Because, if he killed her:

What the hell did he do with her body?

Housekeeping had opened his door and confirmed that he had been in the room at around ten o'clock and looked to be asleep. That was enough for the deputies to rule out foul play.

"Dale, let's take a walk," said Latrell putting a dip in his mouth.

"Dale, I'm guessing things between the two of you were not quite as rosy as you say they were."

"Why do you say that?"

"She got a tattoo and didn't tell you?"

"Look, I don't think it was my wife last night, it was someone else."

"Dale. We've had a few wives go missing from here over the last five years and you know what happened to them, all of them?"

"What?"

"They took off with someone else. Yeah, we had a guy out here last year, frantic that somebody had kidnapped his wife. We go through the whole nine yards. Missing persons report, BOLO alert, you name it. He gets back home and finds all of her stuff has been moved out of the house. She had the whole thing planned from the beginning. It was all a setup, just so she could move out of the house without him there. The very next week, he gets served with divorce papers. Did your wife plan this route by chance?"

"Yes."

"Don't be surprised if the same thing doesn't happen to you."

"My wife wouldn't do that," said Dale.

"I've been married a long time and I can tell you that I have learned one thing about the female species and that is what they say and what they are really thinking is not the same thing. It's up to you to figure out which one is the truth. I'm sorry bud, you been played."

"This is ridiculous, you guys should be out looking for her. she could be trapped inside some guy's van right now."

"Dale, she doesn't want to be found. We can put out a missing person's report for her, but that's all we can do at this point. If you didn't kill her, that only leaves one other option: *she left on her own free will.*

"My wife wouldn't do something like this. Not something as reckless and stupid as this, no way."

"Clearly, she would. She just did it."

Dale was defeated. He went back to his room and called several of her family members. All of them were in shock. None of them ever suspected she was capable of doing something like this. Leaving and not saying a word to anyone, not even her sister. This was madness, pure and simple. All he could do right now was worry. Sit and worry. worry and sit. she was out there, somewhere, he just had to find her.

Before someone else did.

Her sister's name was Ida. Her middle name was Mae. Ida Mae got on the next flight from Phoenix and flew to Billings, several hours away. He was fielding frantic calls from her family. All he could say was that she had disappeared and that he did not have anything to do with it. He couldn't believe he had to add the last part, but he wanted to be honest with everyone.

The office clerk had confirmed everything he had said. The police weren't even looking for her. They seemed convinced she had run off. Dale was angrier at them than he was at his wife. They

had their share of problems, as any married couple will, but nothing that would warrant this. Alex wasn't thoughtless or careless. No way would she have pulled a stunt like this unless she had been forced into it.

Dale met her at the airport. They really had no plan. It was a two-hour drive back to the rest stop. Ida was quiet, but Dale knew she had a lot on her mind. Ida was not the quiet one in the family.

"Dale.....if you did anything to her.....just tell me. It will be much easier on everybody." she said outside of Billings.

"I had nothing to do with this, Ida, and screw you for even suggesting I did," he replied.

"She wasn't really happy with you. She loved you, but she wasn't in love with you."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means an unhappy woman is an unpredictable woman. Did she tell you she was leaving you?"

"No. Look, I'm far from perfect, we both know that. I've made my share of mistakes, but I'm no goddamn murderer, that's for damn sure."

"I really want to believe you, Dale. I really do," she said staring out the window.

"Besides, even if she were going to leave me, she wouldn't have done it this way. You don't know more than you're telling me, right?"

They drove to the rest stop. It was nearly dark and very cold. Ida hadn't dressed properly. Dale gave her a hat and gloves.

"A hell of a lot different than Phoenix. So, what are we doing here?"

"It all started here. She vanished for about an hour. I looked everywhere for her and couldn't find her. There's something about this place that ties all of this together. Let's go look inside." he said.

The two of them hurried up the steps to the warmth of the building. He held the door for her and they stepped inside.

"We're probably grasping at straws here, but it's all I got. Look inside the ladies' room. I'll check the men's restroom." said Dale as he walked inside the men's room.

She had no idea what she was supposed to be looking for. *A clue?* Some faint sign that her sister might still be alive. She wasn't 100 percent sold on Dale's story. She knew he was hiding something from her. He'd slip up and she'd have the evidence she needed. She never did like him or trust him. Her sister was capable of much better. Ida felt like she had settled with Dale. He was a hard worker, but that's about it. He was about as compassionate as a pimp. Her father liked Dale, so that's all that mattered.

She walked around the women's room and found nothing. She went back out into the hallway and waited. This was ridiculous. Dale was purposely wasting time and leading them on a wild

goose chase. She needed to talk to the police that had investigated the case. Even a dumb cop is better than no cop.

"Dale, come on," she said poking her head inside. Hearing no reply, she walked into the men's restroom. It was empty.

Where the hell did he go?

She walked back to the car, expecting to see him. He wasn't there, either. She went back inside and checked both restrooms and the vending machine area. She passed by an elderly couple but didn't see Dale.

This is getting weird. We're headed into the unknown without a map or compass.

She sat on the benches and sent out a group text to her family, updating them of the current situation. There was not much to report.

Dale emerged from the men's room several minutes later. He looked different. She was reasonably sure that he now had a neck tattoo he didn't have two hours earlier when he picked her up.

"Where have you been?" she asked

"Where have you been?"

"Looking for you," she replied.

"There's nothing here. Let's get out of here," he said heading towards the glass doors.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Boise. My gut tells me she is Boise," he said. She noticed that he seemed very tanned and somewhat heavier than he did just an hour ago.

"Your gut?"

"Yes, my woman's intuition. That's where we're headed."

"Wouldn't she just go to mom's house in Missoula?"

"No.....*that's exactly what she wants us to think,*" he said winking at her. Something about him seemed totally different. He had a completely different aura about him. Confident, but not cocky. She liked this new Dale.

"Dale, why would she go to Boise, there's nothing there for her?"

"She likes the big city and all of its trappings. Me, I never really cared much for civilization or its trappings. Sometimes, I wished there was a world I could escape to, my own world that no one else could see. One where I was in charge. One where I was king and undisputed ruler." he said.

"Again, what does this have to do with going to Boise? It's like a whole day's drive from here."

"I'll explain more on the way," he said leading her outside.

"What exactly happened to you in that restroom? You were gone for quite a while."

"My dear....*you wouldn't believe me if I told you.*" He said as he opened her car door. He was growing tired of her and her pointless questions. He would have to ditch her as soon as possible. He had to catch up with Alex.....*or the new and improved Alex. He didn't want her to have all the fun without him.*