

The Station With No Name

Justin Stanchfield

Moonlight bathed the asphalt, gray to silver and back again as clouds raced in fast procession over the narrow canyon. David Riordan negotiated his tired Sentra slowly along the tight curves that followed the river nearly a quarter mile below, the water a ghostly mirror of the winding highway. The canyon widened ahead, revealing sagebrush-covered foothills as alien as the surface of the moon in the headlight glare.

The road turned away from the river and began to climb. The radio, silent but for static within the canyon's shadow, now came once more to life. Riordan reached for the tuner, then paused, a forgotten tingle reawakening in his nerves. It was the fight with Tami this morning that had him on edge, he convinced himself, nothing more.

"She has the same clothes to get happy in," he muttered, the reason behind the fight already forgotten. Around him, the radio pumped out a fast country song, indistinguishable from every other song he had heard since leaving work an hour earlier. Annoyed with the music, he stabbed the selector switch and flipped over to AM. Static burst from the speaker, a hint of distant lightning. The highway steepened, and he dropped the transmission into fourth.

Darkness swept over the desolation as the moon slipped once more behind clouds. Riordan topped the hill and wondered how many times had he driven this road, doing the math as an exercise to stay awake. Five nights a week. Fifty-two weeks a year, and never mind vacations. How many endless, useless miles between where he had been and where he was going. The road to nowhere. He felt trapped in a tape loop, as if some distant night-jock had put the song on replay and left the station. On the radio, a late night talk show played out. Sports. Someone lamenting a bad trade with the Lakers. Riordan scowled.

"This is worse than the shit-kicker stuff," he muttered.

The engine revved as he stabbed the transmission back into fifth and picked up speed across the empty, rolling hills. Unconsciously, his fingers found the tuning knob.

"Hello, children. Welcome to the nighttime." A cold finger reached up Riordan's shirt and tickled his neck as the signal purred from his cheap, backseat speakers. His foot slid away from the accelerator, his attention fixed on the dusky voice. "You're listening to the Station with No Name."

"This isn't happening," Riordan whispered. The voice was all too familiar, an echo. A curse. He had been seventeen the last time he heard the pirate signal. No identifying letters, no cheerful jingles or local commercials. Nothing to identify the voice that had chased him down the miles for nearly three decades.

"I've got something brand new for you from the Steve Miller Band," the radio whispered. "This is Threshold."

"New?" Riordan said, his own voice low as if speaking might break the spell pouring in through the antenna. "That song was released in '77."

A deep, undulating note droned over the air, the synthesizer a perfect counter-point to the shifting moonlight. Riordan shivered, and despite the warm July night he turned the heater on, letting the hot, dusty air roll over him. The music reached its crescendo and broke seamlessly into the guitar-driven beginning of the next track, a peppy lament about leaving home. The song took him back to another night, another him, another endless highway. The memory remained vivid after 27 years, beacon bright, as if he might close his eyes and jump across the gap as easy as distant heat lightning flashes lit the

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"No." Riordan clamped his jaw to still his chattering teeth. Faster than he should, he pushed the little Nissan down the long slope, anxious to beat the other

car to the junction.

#

"David?"

Tami stared at him, her deep brown eyes as warm as chocolate on a winter's night. Tami Mathers then, not Riordan. Funny how little her face had changed since high school. A few more lines on her forehead now, a little fuller in the cheeks. Chestnut hair loose around her shoulders. Nicely rounded breasts beneath a blue silk blouse that was just a little snug. The wondrous scent of soap and honeysuckle shampoo drifted off her skin and mingled with the Armor-All from the dashboard. He twisted in the driver's seat and tried to kiss the soft flesh at the base of her throat, but she

pulled away.

"David," she repeated. "We need to talk."

He'd already heard too many words. Pregnancy. Graduation. Marriage. Find a job and settle down. Do the right thing. The words spun in his mind with a cyclone howl as he dropped Tami off and drove the twenty miles to his own home. Moonlight bounced off the rich blue hood of his Nova and tinted the windshield as he scanned the radio frequencies, searching for anything to take his mind off the new reality he faced. Static-cloaked stations faded in and out. Suddenly, the white noise vanished, replaced by a signal clear as dew on cold glass. Somewhere beyond

the darkened mountains, an unseen Nymph beckoned him away. "The Station with No Name," she whispered, teasing him. "Come with me. The road knows your name."

The Nova sped up, white-walled tires singing over the blacktop beneath. Steely Dan blared from the speakers, a perfect match to his mood. *Drink Scotch whiskey all night long and die behind the wheel*

, a seventeen-year-old's vision of Valhalla. Ahead, the road branched. Funny, he thought. He didn't remember seeing the crossroads before.

#

"That's Steely Dan's 'Deacon Blues.'" The spider-silk voice spun tangled webs

in his mind. "Fresh off their new album, *Aja*. A gift from me to you. Compliments of the Station with No Name."

"Okay, I've lost it," Riordan scolded himself, desperate to hear his own voice. "I've finally gone nuts." Before he could change his mind, he punched the preset buttons on the radio's softly glowing face. The wailing saxophones vanished, replaced by another talk show, a California psychiatrist offering platitudes to the lovelorn. He relaxed, anxious to convince himself that the signal was nothing more than a scrambled memory, a tangled garble of half-recalled events. The road dipped and rose again as it crossed a narrow ravine, and as he topped the rise he

slowed.

Ahead lay only the moon-silvered night. No crossroads. No sign of another car, both gone as if they had never existed. Riordan felt ill, the implications too twisted to ignore. As the highway dipped yet again, the weak signal faded into static. Annoyed, he stabbed the power button with his index finger, quelling the noise. With only the engine and the endless whine of rubber against asphalt to keep him company, the lack of sound was unnerving. Eight hours of loading trucks left him tired, his mind numbed further by the long drive home. He could follow this road with his eyes closed. The warmth from the heater continued to fill the front seat, spinning a

comforting cocoon of air that lulled him. His eyes crossed, the road a gentle stream to float him home.

Gravel crunched beneath the Sentra's right-hand tires as the car drifted onto the shoulder.

"Damn it!" Awake with a vengeance, Riordan pulled the car back to the middle of the blacktop. Shaken, he turned the radio back on. Instead of the hoped-for talk, an all-too-familiar voice glided from the speakers.

"No matter how far you go, you can't outrun yourself," the woman said. "You're listening to the Station with No Name."

Ahead, Riordan saw headlights converging from the left.

#

Dave Riordan pulled the blue Nova over and shut off the engine. He needed fiercely to take a leak and stretch his legs. The car door creaked as he pushed it open, the night air welcome against his skin. He left the radio on, the music a comfort against the enveloping darkness as he walked behind the car and relieved his bladder. Finished, he stood outside and watched the moon play peekaboo through the silver-gray clouds. He took a deep breath. The breeze smelled like sagebrush and dust and hot steel from under the hood, the car nearly black in the shifting light. A gust of wind rolled over him as he leaned against the fender and let his mind wander. A million

thoughts roiled in his brain like a storm unleashed.

"What the hell am I doing?" he asked out loud. As if in answer, the radio signal brightened, buoyed by the approaching cold front that rode the mountains to the west. Startled, he listened to the sultry DJ, her words hypnotic.

"I've got something brand new for you from the Steve Miller Band. This is 'Threshold.'" The music grabbed him, a hand that reached inside his ribs and tied his guts in knots. For a moment he thought about retrieving the tightly rolled baggie from beneath the driver's seat, but he quickly abandoned the idea. His mother would most likely be up when he

got home, and the last thing he needed was to play twenty questions with a Thai-stick buzz going. Dave took a long, deep breath, as if he might smoke the darkness itself, then slid back inside the car and slammed the door shut. The engine turned over but didn't start. He pumped the gas pedal once and turned the key again, and the Nova rumbled to life. Chilled from standing coatless in the breeze, he pulled back onto the highway and started home. Ahead, he caught sight of headlights coming toward him from the east and stepped on the pedal. For a reason he couldn't explain, he wanted to beat the other car to the junction.

#

A sagging jack-leg fence ran along the left barrow pit, the rails grayed with time, so bowed they touched in the middle. The fence had been new the first time he drove over this lonely stretch of road, another sign of how the world had aged and taken him along for the ride. David Riordan kept his eyes fixed on the road ahead and tried to ignore the roiling storm gathered within his chest. The music unnerved him, reopening a wound that refused to heal after twenty-seven years. Strange, he thought, how one night had set the course for everything after, as if his life had balanced across one of the rails, ready to tumble at the first breath of wind.

Eyes glinted to his right, caught in the

headlights, and Riordan slowed down. He'd had one close call already tonight and didn't need another. The radio faded again, the station buried under static. A fast glance to the left confirmed what he feared. The other set of headlights were gone as well, and he saw no trace of the approaching crossroads.

"This is getting too weird." Riordan reached down for the tuner and searched without success for another station. Too many miles between cities, too many mountains for even the strongest signal to punch through. With only the car noise to keep him awake, his mind drifted back to the morning, the fight with Tami less fresh in his mind than the night so long ago when a seventeen-year-old boy

had decided to become a man. Life would have been so different, he mused, if he had followed his instincts and not his conscience that night. Where might he have been now had he argued a little stronger for her to give the baby up? The thought hounded him across the dusty, moon-dappled now.

A half-smile creased his lips as he realized that he had wasted the better part of his life regretting something that hadn't turned out nearly as bad as he sometimes painted it. So what if he and Tami fought?

Didn't every married couple? They had raised their children, made a home, set their stakes and done the best they could with what they had. All in all,

Riordan decided, he had made the right choice. The tuner settled on a new station, the signal strong and impossibly clean.

"Where are you going, fellow voyagers? We are 'Dust in the Wind.' This is Kansas, and you're listening to the Station with No Name. " The hair on the back of his neck rose as the rolling, finger-picked guitar filled the night, infinitely sad, a lone fiddle playing counter-point to his uncertain soul. Closer now, the other car sped toward him, the convergence unavoidable.

#

A jack-rabbit flashed across the highway. Startled, Dave swerved to miss it. The Nova's back tires skidded as

he over-corrected, then brought the car back under control. Absently, he listened to the music, glad for the distraction. Too many thoughts crowded his brain, thoughts of too many options suddenly gone. How had a world full of promise come down to a single choice? Stay or go. Stand up and face what he had done, or turn his back and leave Tami to her own decision. It was her fault, too, wasn't it? Why should he throw away his life because she refused to take the smart path?

A burst of heat lightning lit the sky. Closer now, he saw the other car top the long slope that led to the crossroads. Dave frowned. He had been across this road a thousand times but couldn't recall

the junction. It was impossible, a trick of the mind, and yet, the set of headlights speeding toward him said otherwise.

"It is the question that matters, not the answer." The far distant voice on the radio teased him. "You're listening to the Station with No Name."

"Who the hell are you?" he asked out loud.

Without quite knowing why, he understood he had to beat the other car. It was magic, plain and simple, a spell to be broken if he could find the courage. His foot pressed the gas pedal deeper and the car responded with a willing growl. Race the devil. Beat the other car to the junction, and everything would work out fine. Tami would come to her

senses and he could go on with his life. Just a little more speed was all he needed. To his left, the other headlights brightened, while on the radio, Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham sang about a chain.

#

"Oh shit." David Riordan shivered despite the heater. The Sentra was oven-hot. "This can't be real." Memory pounded home every detail of the lost night. He remembered the way he had pushed his car for every ounce of speed he could coax from the engine. It had been madness then, and it was madness now. Nothing could change what had been. The past wasn't a road that could be traveled at will, and he wouldn't take

it if it was. This was his life, and why would he change it? Didn't he love Tami?

Didn't he?

"This is Fleetwood Mac's 'The Chain.'" the unseen voice crooned in his speakers. Riordan imagined what she looked like, this electric temptress. Onyx-dark eyes that glinted in the soft glow from the board in front of her. Full red lips and a smile that whispered come away. Now it all made sense. He could change the past. All he had to do was let the other car win. Back off the accelerator and watch the headlights flash past, and everything would be different, the balance tipped. Different choices, different lives. No Tami. No

grinding responsibility. Let the phantom beat him to the crossroads and he could finally have the life he was meant to live. A string of bass notes on the radio pounded, the kick drum synched to his heartbeat. Let the other car win. As simple as that. Let the kid have his way...

"No." David Riordan clamped his jaws together and shoved the transmission back into overdrive.

#

Fear gathered into a tight ball that clung to the base of his spine. Dave Riordan forced one hand off the Nova's wheel, his fingers stiff from holding on, and wiped the sweat off his forehead before it could roll into his eyes. The car

leaned dangerously as he swept into the final curve before the junction. His backside slid toward the door, pulled out by his madman's rush to beat the other set of headlights to the crossroads. He had to win. Couldn't explain it, but he understood instinctively that it was worth risking his neck.

A sign jumped into view, but he had no time to read it; his attention was fixed on the convergence ahead. The other car was closer to the crossroads, but he was faster. Just a few more seconds. Just a little more speed. Ahead, he saw the blood-red reflection of a stop sign. He gritted his teeth and pushed the accelerator to the floorboard.

"What are you trying to do?" David Riordan muttered as he watched the other headlights speed up. Couldn't the damn fool see him? Through a curtain of nervous fear, he groped for details from that long-ago night. Had he beat the other car? He was certain he hadn't, that he had lost his nerve at the last moment and let the stranger win. At the time he had tried to convince himself the urgency was all in his imagination, a by-product of the pressure he was under. Now, seeing the event from the other side, he felt the same raw need. If he trusted his memory, he would win by default when his younger self chickened out.

If he was wrong, chances were strong they both would die.

The insanity of the moment stabbed at him. Let the other car win, he decided. Don't risk your life for nothing. No connection existed, no link between his then and his now. But as hard as he tried, he couldn't pull his foot away. The Sentra's engine whined, the machine never designed for speed. Fence jacks flashed by in a blur. The barrow pit was a shifting study in shadow and light. A stop sign hove into view. Already, the headlights from the left spilled across the junction and blended with his own, damming a pool of white in the darkness. The radio crackled as another burst of lightning painted the saw-toothed sky and broke for a heartbeat the searing guitar solo. The music built to a climax,

strong as sex, primal and unstoppable. He had to cross the junction first. Lose his nerve now and everything he had, everything that mattered, his wife, his kids, the man he was, would vanish with it. Flawed or not, this was his life. Closer now, so close. Grit his teeth and go. Too late to turn. Trust his memory. The other car would back off. It had to.

"Slow down, you son of a bitch," Riordan said, the muttered words an angry prayer. The pool of light brightened until the highway gleamed. The crossroads was a crucifix studded with road signs. Riordan felt the tension in his spine as a physical press between his shoulder blades as he hunched over the wheel. Impossible as it seemed, he

was in the lead. A few more seconds and he would scream through the intersection. The other car would back off, he was certain. From the corner of his eye, its headlights stabbed at him. He couldn't do it. It was too close. Better to let the other car win and damn the cost of losing.

"No." Riordan spit the word through gritted teeth. His life was worth fighting for, this reality the one he wanted. The wheel shimmied in his hand as he stomped the accelerator to the stop. One final burst of speed, all he had left, all he needed. A rush of triumph burst inside him as he caught the flicker of brake lights from the other car. He had won.

Unexpectedly, a black spot leapt into view, the pothole unseen until it was too late to avoid. The Sentra's front tire clipped the broken asphalt. Riordan slammed against the door as he fought to regain control. His foot left the gas pedal, and it took every ounce of resolve he had not to stomp on the brake, almost guaranteeing a roll-over. He stabbed the transmission into fourth, then third. The engine howled as it absorbed the car's velocity. Finally slowing enough, he pumped the brakes, and the car skidded to a stop. David Riordan's sternum crashed against the wheel, so hard he thought it might shatter under his weight. The engine died with a cough, the sudden silence unnerving. Around him,

the world seemed filled with a harsh white light.

The brightness confused him. Heart pounding, Riordan sat up straight. The Sentra had stopped halfway through the intersection, the headlights still on, a noisy buzzer reminding him to turn them off. A second set of lights blazed through the driver's side window. The other car sat unmoving at the edge of the junction. To his amazement, both had stopped. Shaking and dizzy, his fingers numb, Riordan fumbled for the ignition. He tried to remember the night so long ago, but the memory was hazy, and he couldn't recall the details. Maybe, he thought, as he lurched through the intersection, it had never happened at

all. Behind him, the other car pulled across the junction and sped away, soon lost to view. Still shaking, Riordan took a long slow breath, then reached down to turn up the radio. Somehow, he wasn't surprised that the pirate station was gone. Slowly he relaxed and started down the last long stretch home.

#

Dave Riordan's legs felt numb. His heart was pounding so hard he thought it might explode. Everything had happened so fast, he barely had time to react as he watched the boxy little car skid to a stop in the middle of the crossroads. The Nova wove dangerously as he brought it to a stop inches from the white line. Too shaken to do anything else, he waited

until the stranger restarted his car, then drove through. Suddenly, the need he had felt only seconds ago to beat the other car was gone; whatever madness had overtaken him just a few moments before had passed. The Nova's engine revved as he crossed the junction. He had a lot of decisions to make - hard choices, no doubt - but somehow, he realized, things would work out. He glanced in his mirror, but the other car was already lost to the night. A burst of static crackled over the speaker, then faded. Distant now, the signal returned, and for a few seconds the dusky voice from nowhere held his attention. "Time for goodbyes, dear children. And remember, I'm always watching. This is the Station

with No Name."

Dave Riordan smiled to himself, a sad, grown-up smile, and started home.

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