

El Paso 256 Miles
by Jeremy Damato

Sam gravely looked at the speedometer as the pointer shaft cleared ninety, El Paso 256 miles. A terrible tension crossed his stomach. He threw a tiny glance in the small rear mirror. A crazy state of mind started to take hold of him. He couldn't see past it. The feeling absorbed him. Not having enough sleep, Sam pushed his sight through the weariness when suddenly his daughter Andrea woke up crying, anxiously waking his wife Mary who was asleep next to him. She tried to settle Andrea's hysterics, but not before giving Sam an unpleasant, contemptuous look. It was as if a spotlight had switched on, revealing them from out of the darkness, as in a scene from a stage play.

Sam stopped their Ford Sedan by the side of the road and Mary picked Andrea up from out of the backseat, carrying her into the desert grassland thinking the fresh air might calm her.

Many times, Sam felt separate, desperately separate. He wondered if it was his loner attitude that alienated him from his own family? Or was it Mary's indifference toward him? Somewhere between his craving for solitude and companionship, was the dilemma that made him wonder how to keep being in the moment and why it evaporated into daydreaming, yearning, and lusting after some image of reality elsewhere. His life was an endless unexciting succession of repetitions. He needed new places, new faces and change. Nevertheless, Sam knew that satisfying one desire would only agitate another.

He remained in the car and dragged on a cigarette looking pensively at a strip of land in the headlights where the rocks and dirt met the asphalt.

There was just one old man sitting at the counter early that morning, a five-balloon bouquet by

his side. Sam nodded at the brightly colored balloons and asked,

“What’s the occasion?”

The old man turned and looked at him.

“It’s the 10th anniversary of my wife’s death, I’m going to put these at her graveside.”

“Not flowers?” asked Sam.

The old man just smiled and said.

“I’m not mourning.”

A waitress poured Sam a cup of coffee. He watched the steam slowly rise and curl from the flared top of the white mug.

“I used to think getting married and having children was a way to avoid loneliness, but I’m lonelier now than I’ve ever been,” said Sam, surprised by his candor. “Maybe I was better off alone. God knows it was simpler.”

“It takes a lifetime to appreciate what’s in your own backyard,” responded the old man.

“It doesn’t matter where in this world you go, alone it makes no difference, no more so if you were the only man on the face of the earth. Without a witness you see nothing, makes no difference if you did or didn’t.”

Sam stubbed out his cigarette. U.S. 90 was a long stretch of road, he felt like he was going to fall right off into darkness. El Paso 256 Miles.

END