

Jake Brown's big rig chrome rain cap popped and dropped. The cemetery's black wrought iron gate in his side mirror shrunk until he descended a West Virginia hill and it disappeared. With wife Athena's remains buried beneath fresh sod, her Bible lay rubber-banded on his Kenworth's passenger seat.

He loosened his knotted blue tie and undid the top button of his white shirt, its purchase receipt jammed yesterday into his wallet. Even though freed from the shirt collar's constraint, Jake's chafed neck continued to ache. He stretched its muscles left and right to no avail, needle pricks of pain merengued on reddened skin. His right hand smoothed his cherished tie across his insidious paunch. When worn fifteen years ago, it hung straight in front of his toned abs as he waited at the altar for the love of his life.

In Central Pennsylvania, a dark-haired stranger answered the door at Jake's brother's last address. With a child crying in the background, she said she didn't know a Wayne Brown.

As Jake piled up the westward miles on I-90, he counted himself a family of one. At a truck stop, he locked Athena's Bible into his cab and carried his strapped brown suitcase into a trucker's lounge. After a skimpy maroon towel wiped away the shower water that didn't splash at his feet, he hurled it into a canvas laundry cart. Comfortable in an open-necked blue plaid shirt and relaxed-fit blue jeans, he carried his funeral garb to a table facing a lounge wall. His hands trembled as he layered into his suitcase his black suit, white shirt, blue tie and spit-shined black oxfords, soles up.

"Perhaps you could escort me."

Jake whirled to his left. The woman's sparkling blue eyes outshined her sequined black ankle-length formal gown. He racked his brain until he succumbed to the conclusion he hadn't met the woman at any dance. The lounge, empty when he'd entered, had but a "truckers only" sign to enforce the rule. He slid his suitcase's two brass clasps closed and grabbed it to flee this beguiling truck-stop Lolita.

"Didn't mean to startle you." Jake struggled to decipher her plaintive words. "I'm at my wits' end. My Red Wing Trucking dispatcher ran out of options and my family answers no texts."

"You're putting me on?"

Her left hand reached for a black clutch purse. "Want me to show you a company ID or my CDL?"

Jake raised his suitcase, a shield to his burdened heart. "Red Wing, you say."

Her head, with its short-cropped black hair, bobbed twice.

"Ran into Red Wing driving twins south along the Blue Ridge last year. Recall last name Thompson. Know them?"

"Ray and Ryan. They're shooting the Rockies this week."

While Jake didn't cotton to peak climbing, as to Ray and Ryan, she was dead on. Jake's shoulders slumped and he let his left hand relax and release its suitcase grip. "Pleased to have met your acquaintance." He pivoted toward the exit. His suitcase swung and bumped his right hip without damage before he twisted his shoulders and head left. "When you see them, give them a shout out from Jake . . . Jake Brown."

"Nancy. Wait a minute, please."

She scurried around him and her nylon-covered feet skidded to a stop. Jake allowed his heels to stick to the linoleum.

She extended her hands, palms up. "I wasn't teasing. You could be my escort. That suit you packed would be perfect. My sister's getting married tonight and my International water pump busted a gasket. None available until tomorrow."

Jake lifted his gaze and chin to the ceiling's flickering fluorescent light. He suspected the harsh light, together with his droopy eyelids and matted brown hair, cast him as a zombie.

"Please, I won't bother you for a ride back."

Jake pondered being a Good Samaritan. His dispatcher didn't expect Jake's contact until the morning. "Only if you're going west with no gravel road detours." Jake's shoulders mimicked the Tower of Pisa when he thought she readied to hug him, or worse yet, plant a kiss. She didn't.

"Cleveland, Ohio."

"One condition."

"What?"

Jake shifted his body's weight to his left foot. "My offer's for a hitch; that's all. Ain't putting on no suit. Ain't sitting at no fancy family gathering."

"Deal. Want to shake on it?"

"No. Your word's good."

Three minutes later, Jake latched their travel bags into his empty fifty-three-foot trailer. Before he let Nancy hike her skirt and climb past the passenger door, he snatched Athena's Bible and tossed it onto his sleeper bunk's down-filled sleeping bag.

Small talk evaded him as he delighted in jammed gears and passed RVs. In his big rig's wake, a smorgasbord world of cities crawling up valley walls, roads circling mountains and flashing lights signaling tolls, accidents and speeding ambulances never acknowledged his existence, almost the same with Nancy. Their companionable silence broken, by his count, but thrice in two hundred miles.

One exit past Dead Man's Curve on the AMVETS Highway, Nancy alerted him to follow Cleveland's East Shoreway and pull off I-90 near Euclid where it and Ohio's co-signed State Route 2 separated. Parked on the shoulder next to rain-puddled asphalt, he and Nancy bade farewell. His fingers tapped his steering wheel as Nancy, overnight case in hand, tiptoed into the mist.

Dispatched first to central Indiana, Jake used the drone of his tires being ground into particle sized pollution to allay his grief. From the Midwest to the East Coast and south on I-95 to the Southeast, he zigzagged and backtracked with an abandon that numbed his mind and belied his trip log. He blasted his horn through thunderstorms, snow blizzards and steadied his front bumper against a howling wind without precipitation. Fueling next to the Thompson twins's Red Wing semi, he forgot to ask about Nancy. Two truck stop Christmas meatloaf dinners had intervened since he had dropped her near a red Taurus.

No idle thought existed without Athena. On the road, his life's happiest memories featured Athena. They fluttered and waved through his mind like triangular pennants strung on unending roadside telephone lines along interstates and two-lane state highways.

Isolated from his emotional and spiritual anchor—Athena—Jake longed to jettison his heart's gloom and recapture what he had lost. The dark threatening clouds beyond his windshield forecast a bleak day in Paradise he needed to speed through.

A flashing red light and traffic to his right required he brake. It was then he noticed the new hand-painted, double-posted, four-foot wide sign. He stared at its top line: "Welcome to Paradise, Minnesota" before he dropped his gaze to the second line promise: "Where Fulfilled Dreams Begin."