

The oil refineries and chemical plants were all in what we called “cancer alley,” though it sprawled far further than just an alley.

It was, as you can tell by the name, common enough to get sick or to die. Hydrogen sulfide leaks had killed thirty men in the past year and a half. People would be shuffled to other jobs around the refinery if they started to fail at simple tasks from the prolonged exposure to fumes. But they were never outright fired. You would still see them around. That was one thing that gave me hope, that the company did care, enough so that we would be allowed to keep making a living no matter what befell us. My own tumor was enough, after a point, to make them switch me to driver, so that I could be sitting most of the day, outside the areas with the most toxins. I guess they crunched the numbers and found that the liability wouldn't change despite me being in a moving vehicle, which surprised me. The change to delivery driver was a welcome one. The hours in boiling hot rooms maintaining equipment were behind me. At this point it was just me and my LGV, delivering parts between warehouses and refineries.

I remember that day, one of my first days as a driver, I loaded up the boxes outside with the warehouse employees, preparing for my haul. The city sprawled around us, any direction the same as the last, the neon signs for bar across the way where I spent every off-hour buzzing, the warehouse equipment clanging metal on metal. Once we had loaded the last box, I drove my lumbering LGV out onto the cracked streets and looked at the addresses circled on the map. Several were different locations across the city, but one was oddly far out of the way. It wasn't uncommon for me to have deliveries to places outside the city, but this was just a red circle out in what looked like the middle of nowhere.

I wasn't paid to ask questions, so I drove. I made one delivery in the city, and went on toward the next. Then the next. I passed the first checkpoint, the guards nodding at me and letting me go through after climbing into the back of the vehicle to inspect the boxes. Since the war began they'd really cracked down on security. The truck rattled in its way, the old girl whimpering softly as she carried me forward down the road. The battle planes droned overhead, headed toward the airfield to reload with diesel, their lifeblood.

Outside the city is just this bleak desert, if you could even call it that anymore. Any plants and animals that had been there are long gone now. Except the metal oil Donkeys tilting back and forth, harvesting from the oilfield. It was flatlands, the wind dissolving your voice easily as it barreled past, and I closed my windows tight against the fumes it carried.

It was getting evening. My eyes had begun to shut on their own accord when I pulled in at the third stop. I unloaded the box with the parts he needed, and saw that there was only one box left, after this, still one more delivery to make. Still, it was getting late and I knew I wouldn't make it today, even if it meant I got in trouble.

“Think you could stay and help us install it?” asked the gasman, indicating the delivered package, chewing his gum obnoxiously. “I'll put you up for the night.”

By this point I was so tired all I could do was shrug and nod. I'd been driving since the dawn, over sixteen hours, and I hadn't slept prior, having loaded boxes all night into other trucks.

"You're a hero," he said, slapping my back. "Family next door keeps complaining about the smell. Like it doesn't always smell."

He pointed to a truck, a large thing, the source of the aforementioned smell, steadily dripping into a great pool on the ground, which had clearly been left for days, the rivulets streaming off into a little side divot, through cracks in the concrete. It would only take one part to fix the leak, presumably the one he'd had delivered.

I hunkered beside the thing and then slid underneath. I worked on the vehicle, feeling the piping rattling, shifting and groaning as if in pain. It felt no pain, I reminded myself in my exhaustion, it was a machine. My arms began to shake but I continued.

There was movement in the corner of my eye and I turned to the side. I could see a little boy peeking through the fence, his near-white blonde hair pressed against the dark wood, his eye peering through the slats. He didn't wave, just stared. He might have been the neighbor kid. I hadn't seen anyone else but the gasman, and was starting to wonder if there were workers here at all.

The gas man spoke to me about his machinery, all rented out for the toil, gave me a story of how it had come to be so damaged. Gas vampires, the salesman told me. They'd been siphoning his gas, hanging off the sides of the vehicles as they rolled their cargo down the dust roads, piercing the sides to steal the diesel and leaving the vehicles to die slow deaths. Damn thieves, he sputtered. Siphoning the livelihood from under him, and the shit isn't cheap. I nodded, pretending to listen as he went on. I was thinking of the boy across the way behind the little fence, and the fumes that must give him headaches, that must curl up into his lungs and poison the cells from the inside, confusing them, making them grow strangely. I looked up to see if his blue eye was still watching, but he was gone.

There was this man named Don that I knew from the refinery, who had been to the battlefield. Don always seemed numb in this way I couldn't be, and he always seemed to know something I didn't. Maybe because I hadn't been to war, I thought. He had said it was all vampires out there. I asked what he meant, he said men would kill for an ounce of food or diesel and then go to bed like it was nothing. Draining it all dry. Not like here, where they wasted gallons and gallons of it from poorly maintained tanks.

Diesel is a heavy gas, meaning it's less susceptible to air sparging cleanup, and anything else is too expensive for them to even bother with. It sinks into the dirt and you don't see it anymore, so the gas men think it's nothing but wasted product. But the diesel lies down like a hemorrhage, spreading into the pockets of the earth, fingering into the little dentritic spaces and the water and the dirt and it rises up through the cracks like a ghost, the vapor-form-smell pungent and nauseating. They begin to see it in the water, lying atop as they drink.

The great towering vehicle dripped into the endless puddle. I finally succeeded in opening up the leaking fuel line and laid down the catchment basin to catch a great deal of it, and after that I removed the damaged piece and replaced it quickly enough. I was a little irritated at having to do it. But the owner looked thin and drawn, not capable physically of this kind of handiwork. Maybe that's why he hadn't been drafted, I thought. Myself, it had been a matter of the cancer. I wouldn't be useful out there with a lump in my head, and I would certainly not have helped morale, the pollutants of my illness seeping into the ranks and poisoning everyone's moods. It's why I didn't really mention it at work, except for the terse conversation a week ago about swapping duties.

I finished up the repair and as promised, my host put me up for the night in the rooms above the truckyard. I walked carefully up the stairs he had pointed out, metal slatted and utilitarian, without any railing to grasp onto. At the top was a room. Old fashioned, wooden. On the floor, at the center of the room, was a stain, its thick ringed edges giving way to a faint brown center. There was a tattered little rug that I used to cover it, feeling absurdly as though if I stepped on it my foot would get wet, though it was dried to the point of being crusted over. There weren't any other workers' rooms that I'd seen. I still hadn't seen a single other person, besides the little kid next door.

I slept in the bed, smelling like must, that faint scent of something old and warm. I dreamed of a gentle desert calling out to me, surrounded by cacti, clear sunlight falling gently on my face, and I felt this longing that I had never felt before, for somewhere I had never seen.

Halfway through the night I woke with this intense feeling that I had forgotten something, thinking of that delivery I had not made. It was ridiculous not to wait til morning, but I couldn't shake the feeling, so I crept downstairs, thinking I would just check my truck and make sure there wasn't anything pressing.

I could hear this faint creaking from down the stairs, over and over. Creak. Stop. Creak. Stop. I thought that the gasman might be awake. But when I came down, he wasn't there. There was a man in the corner rocking in a chair. Perhaps he was a worker, I thought, finding this relief in seeing another person.

"You live here?" I asked. He didn't startle, just turned to look at me like he knew I'd been there all along.

"It leaks," the man muttered. He looked back down at his hands, rubbing the fingers together with a careful slowness. His skin flickered in the firelight, something off about it, as though the skin didn't quite fit correctly over the bone.

"What's that," I asked the man.

"It leaks out," he said. His hair was this wispy color, soft platinum.

"The gas?" I asked. "No, I fixed it."

The fire flickered again and I got a better look at him. Tumors protruded visibly from his neck in great lumps, flesh unlike the rest of his skinny body.

Useless, that was the word that came to my mind. He was just this old useless thing, worn down, unable to work. Scrap of a man. I felt guilty then. That's what the other side of the war would call a useless eater, it's not what our side would say. Our side is supposed to prize humanity. It's why the gasman had generously put me up, why he must be taking care of this old man, too, though he couldn't possibly work any longer.

"I remember what I was before," said the old man, still running his hands together, his gnarled skin lifting and settling unnaturally. "I worked for the gasman many years, before."

"Im... I'm sure," I said, feeling pity for the man. I was sure he was a good worker once.

He opened his mouth and told this story then.

"He was walking," the man said. *He*, he said, he told this story as if it were about someone else, not himself, "it was before he was discharged for losing some fingers. He'd felt this splitting pain out of nowhere, in this little tract of land in Poland."

"It was the worst pain he had ever felt," he said, "You see, ghosts don't stay where they *died*, they stay where they felt the most pain in life. The land remembers these things," he said, "it catalogues the suffering."

The smell of gas was strong now. I noted that his fingers weren't missing, as he had said, they instead sat limp, some stiff and others dropped over. Perhaps that's what he had meant by losing them, losing the function. Or perhaps he had made the whole thing up. The machines stood outside the window, the potent stink of gasoline everywhere, the tanks shining in the faint light.

I muttered some excuse and I left the man there staring into space and went out to my LGV. The moonlight was dim, muffled by thick clouds and industrial plumes even out at the edge here. I opened up the back of the truck. There was only one box left. My last delivery.

I was fully awake by now. I don't know what exactly came over me, just this need to finish the job properly. I took the truck and drove it out into the desert to deliver the package to the location. The fields passed me by, oil donkeys tilting, slight movements up, and down, up and down, never slowing their progress. I could feel some eyes on me. Creak. Stop. Creak. Stop. The drills just kept their gentle rocking motions, like animals at a well.

It was dark in a way I had never seen in the city. This dark was a steep wet sheet covering my eyes, dirtying everything but the twin beams from my LGV. Everything, dirty.

I pulled up by the curve in the highway, the place the map had its bright red circle. I pulled out the map and scrutinized it carefully, certain I had come to the wrong place.

I took my knife to the package and tore at the packing tape, and I opened it. I blinked, not believing what I was seeing.

Inside the box was my body. My own dead face staring back at me, the same birthmarks, the same pocked skin. My head sat on the top, and the rest was disassembled below, reeking of meat. I covered my nose at the reeking smell. Blood seeped into the cardboard corner and dripped out, barely held in by the tape. I looked behind me and discovered that it had been leaking as I had walked, little drops on the ground, the deep scarlet puddling on the dust in wet patterns.

I placed the box of organs and flesh on the ground. The ground screamed as if in pain, the dust cloying to my legs in supplication. The head lifted from the split alley of my body's neck and looked at me, dead eyes piercing the dark.

It remembers what it was before, I thought.

The hot air was dead, suffocating, and I could still smell the gas on the air with the meat, could still feel the choking feeling of the fumes, like I hadn't left the refinery at all. Had that smell been coming from me this whole time? I touched my own face, felt the rough, pocked skin, the hair on my chin, assuring myself I was still there. But I knew then— I was him, the man with the strange skin, it was me. I felt the way it didn't quite fit. When has it stopped fitting? This morning? Tonight? When had my body been taken from me and replaced with something that thought it was me?

... *I was* the thing that wasn't me. I was the stranger. I reached out and took my boxcutting blade, and I cut into my skin, and peeled it back. I took my other hand and forced it underneath, and felt no pain. Only dry, cold metal beneath the skin.

I stood there alone, the dead body spilling from the box disassembled. I looked at my hands, covered in blood, and then out at the empty desert, echoing winds traveling past me, the uncaring landscape still in the face of my despair.

I am ashamed to admit I left the body there by the roadside. I climbed into the truck and drove until I hit the city, with the artificial sunrise, the everlasting lamp light of the oil refineries. I buried myself in it, driving with the radio turned high to drown out my thoughts, hoping selfishly that the body would never be found, that it had all been just a bad dream.

When i returned to the truck yard it was early morning. I went to the foreman and told him i had spent the night outside town, unable to finish the deliveries in the allotted time. The foreman wrote me up, and that was it. I never heard anything more of it. I simply went back to work, as the machines do.

Nothing changed.