

“The Moment”

Dave Louapre

There's a little black mouse that lives beyond these walls, and every so often he appears through a crack near the floor, scurries over near the bunk, then stops and waits for me to notice him. The walls are cold and the air thick, almost foggy. They keep it that way, I suspect, so I'll stay calm, as if calm had anything to do with it. The mouse is back right now, staring through me. Each time he does the same thing; scurries, stops, stares, and when I meet his gaze, rises on his haunches and laughs. He laughs horribly. He's enormous when he laughs—bigger than me, but I'm not scared. He's just checking up on me for them, doesn't know I'm on to him. I move forward and, as always, he darts back through his crack. I'm alone.

They look at me with apprehension and try to figure me out so that everything will make sense to them and they can go home and eat their ground beef in peace, having picked the lock. They smirk as they walk by because they can't figure me out, why I don't talk or eat their food. Sometimes they'll call me names, or jingle their keys, but it doesn't bother me. I don't think anything bothers me.

No, that's not right. The keys jingling bother me. I hate it. The keys that open their doors. The keys, dammit, I hate them. But I won't let them know they bother me, though they already know.

The mouse is gone, and I'm going to sit here and wait for him to come back. I have no clock or watch, so I can't keep track of time. They took my watch away from me, my gold watch with the perfect crystal and split-second accuracy; the one she gave me for Christmas. What was her name? What difference does it make? They took it away with my money and wallet and keys. They took my keys, and you know what they did? They dangled them in front of me, the bastards. They shook my keys in my face and they laughed at me. I just tried to ignore them and melt into the wall. As far as I can tell, I've been incarcerated for crimes against humanity, Habeus Corpus, E. Pluribus Unum, with liberty and justice for all. Yeah, they got me, but I'm not sure why. I remember vaguely,

but I can't feel it. I'm not certain I want to. Maybe I do, otherwise I wouldn't be telling you.

My grey walls serve me as glass ones would another person. They're smoky and smooth, and when the fog is thick I can look right through them and see into things, like looking through a jar filled with liquid plastic, so thick, so safe. I like the walls, and they seem to understand me. I know I could dive into them and hide if I really wanted, but why bother? I'd know where I was and that's all that counts. That's how I got here in the first place—just dove through the wall. I'm not sure why I did, but knowing isn't important. Doing it is what mattered, and I did and they didn't and now I'm here and I probably should be.

There's the mouse again. He's not by the bunk this time, but just in front of his crack; doesn't want to be caught. But I don't want to catch him right now. Too much trouble. He rears up (he's enormous) and instead of laughing, he's imitating someone driving a car. The bastard. I throw my shoe at him and he laughs and he's gone. God I hate him. He mimicked a driver—me. It was me. It was me driving my car. Driving and driving. Driving and steering and braking and accelerating and accelerating . . . Rhode Island to Texas. Ha. The map is so small and the red lines of highway are so simple and your estimations are so pragmatic and you're a fool to believe it. Virginia, Kentucky, Arkansas and all the rest, sticking out the welcome mat and patting you on the back with a warm smile and straight highway, then turning and closing the gate tight and tearing up that highway and laughing at your back. And the signs and the diners and the gas stations. And the green-eyed girls behind countless counters whose images stay with you and force you to become unreasonable . . .

Oh, did I mention the priest? Yes, a priest came by to see me this morning, put his hand on my shoulder and went into his pitch. He wanted to sell me a confession or something. Or, he wanted me to confess something. I didn't speak, of course. I stared and waited for the mouse. He didn't come. What were his words? Let's see, something like, "My son, if you are sorry for what you have done, if you are truly sorry, tell God and he will forgive you."

Sorry. Sorry for what? Who was he talking about? I just sat. I don't know if I laughed or smiled outwardly, but I was laughing inside. I was laughing as he spoke, and I lost myself in the depths of the plastic walls until he left. He patted me on the back, giving me a concerned look of burden. When he left, I noticed his white collar had a grey smudge on it.

The keys. There's those wretched keys again, driving

through my head. I cover my ears and I still hear them. A deputy is standing through the bars saying something about a lawyer, but I don't respond. I don't even look at him. He'll be gone soon I know, and sure enough he is. Gone. I hate him and his keys. I sometimes wish I had my keys back, but they'd be no good to me now. Not even if I was outside; no good at all.

A tray of food is lying on the floor by the gate, and its aroma seems to linger in my eyes. I never pay much attention to what's on the tray, but there's something here, something that's trying to make me remember. I've felt this before, but never actually tried to remember. Whatever it is will come to me in time. The walls are deep and grey, and that's all I need. I read about something called osmosis once, absorbing through the tissue, and I think I understand it now. I can, absorb the wall, and it can absorb me. Being able to dilute myself and fade into the grey is luxury. I feel like I can . . .

That's it. That smell. It's the bread. The bread on that tray smells just like the bread she used to make. She made it for me for breakfast when I started the trip. It's the bread. My wife cooked the same things everyday, but the bread was special, good. I say my "wife", but I wasn't married really, she was. Marriage means two people loving and understanding one another, trying to help each other. That's how it was at first, until she replaced me with a credit card. The understanding was gone. I asked her once to listen to me, to try and feel what I felt. I just wanted to slow down. She said she was sick of hearing my bleeding heart complaining, that I cried too much for a man, and if I needed someone to listen, I could see the company shrink at the office, the one my boss wanted me to see. What does my boss know? His cure-all was sending me on business trips. Yeah, business trips are luxury he said, and I'll get to see the country and bring home the bacon and end up in Texas. In Texas for christsake. Texas Texas Texas. Goddamn that smell, that bread, and the dirt and that road worker...

He's back. I knew he'd be back—the mouse. I must've missed his move across to the bunk. I hate him. He won't leave me alone; and sometimes I feel like I'll never get rid of him. I stand up, and he stands with me, smiling, ready. He starts to raise his arms to the driver's position but I leap at him and sprawl on the floor, watching him laugh as he glances back at me before disappearing into his crack. The floor is cold and grey, and I want to stay here forever.

The guard at the gate is laughing, but I ignore him. He doesn't mean a thing to me. Neither did that cop at the Texas

border. God, anywhere but Texas, with the dust and the white center lines and the shot up signs. Not Texas. Not a highway patrolman. His boots glossy black, and his badge shining so bright, even from fifty yards out. The sun glaring through the splattered windshield and the dust and the static, and that girl behind the counter with those deep green eyes. The car swerved without warning. But I tried to warn him, I really did. I tried to make him understand but he couldn't, and my grip was sweaty when I left him broken in the road. It was Texas, and I left him in the hot Texas dust. The static went away, but my sweaty grip didn't.

But I never finished telling you about the road worker. He was the first. It was Arkansas, I think, the third day of the trip and no cars in sight. The radio hissed loud and mean, and it spat at me; spat with smiling voices and mock families and static—every other minute, static. There's just no getting rid of it. I turned off the radio and the static only got louder. I couldn't hear.

He was collecting garbage from the side of the road, alone. His day-glo vest stared me down, and I felt something I'd never felt before, something strong and unavoidable. That's when my grip tightened for the first time. My grip tightened as my foot pushed the pedal to the floor, and I think I screamed. My eyes shut tight, I know that, and I heard him tumble over the hood and scrape along the ground. I thought of my wife, that time I accidentally backed into her in the driveway, sending her sprawling into the hedge. She wasn't hurt, but she sure got mean when she saw me laughing to myself. She just looked so ridiculous in the hedge with that ugly orange dress on. She never forgave me for it. This was no different, I couldn't have done it on purpose. My heart was either beating fast or not at all, and I drove for miles before I realized his hat was caught on my wipers.

The guard has already taken the tray away, but the bread still smells sweet. The bread. Can't get it like that in roadside diners. Can't get anything from the road except tired and angry. Angry at people you've never seen before. A blue station wagon from Florida with a happy, singing family inside can set you off if the static is loud. The static makes you tingle and go numb at the same time. I wanted to warn them too, but I couldn't. I couldn't make them understand they shouldn't be there, to stop singing. They were just like a radio family, and their voices pulsed in the excruciating static. I pulled along side and stared through my dirty window at the driver, the father. He stared back, and stopped singing. Checking the road ahead, he looked back at me, then at the

yellow hat on my wipers. His expression went blank; his eyes were frightened. I wondered if he had a happy marriage. I wondered if his wife listened to him. I wondered if he too heard the static and the wheel drove me towards them. My grip was tight, and I noticed the sweat on my face in the mirror. I noticed how it made me look like wax. Ha, wax. Wax models belong in museums where it's cool and safe and soothing, not in the heat. Not on the road. It was very funny to me then, and a nervous grin twitched on and off my face. The sound of the crash drowned out the static and gradually subsided as I drove away from the broken guard rail, until all I could hear was the drone of my engine. The static had stopped, along with the singing, and my grip was steady as something like electricity surged through my body, charging me.

Oh yeah. After the priest left today, a man from the F.B.I. came. He asked a lot of questions and smirked a lot, as if to let me know he could get around my silence. He put one foot on the chair, leaning on his knee and stroking his moustache, then asked me something "off the record," something "just between us." I don't even remember what he asked, just that he kept repeating the words innocent and killed. I knew what he was talking about, but not what he meant, or what he wanted. The F.B.I. man kept staring at me, trying to figure me out like the rest. His shoes were shiny, but he didn't have a badge. Just a red tie, white shirt, and navy blue blazer. I dove into the walls until he left.

I figure it's probably late in the day now, if what they brought me before was lunch. The mouse hasn't been out for awhile, but it doesn't matter. The walls are cloudy and soft. I can't be seen because they absorb me, and I'm very still. I needed walls like these all my life, but I got wood paneling instead. I needed grey cement floors, but I got linoleum. I needed someone to absorb and understand me, but I got a wife. All I wanted was walls, but I didn't know it then. I do now. I have my walls—the ones I needed all along.

Yes, walls are safe, unlike the road. You know what you have with a wall, but a road keeps going and throws new twists at you. Like that electric feeling. I'd never felt that before, but the road made me feel it. It's something you have no choice in. The flesh on your scalp tingles and the hair on your neck freezes as your grip tightens and teeth clench and pores fill with sweat. Your entire nervous system seems to act on its own. Your breath gets short and your blood runs fast and your brain wants to reason but your soul wants to act, and

you lose all sense of time and surrender. That's how it happens, dammit, and that's what happened. Arkansas. Arkansas in the blazing afternoon. Hadn't had a rest since Kentucky and finally took one, to remove the yellow hat. Arkansas.

The mouse has been gone longer than ever, and I don't understand why. Is he done with me? Do they have enough to put me up for good? I was getting kind of used to him; gave me something to do, to think about. He'd just pop out of that crack and there would be the electricity and the dust and the bodies. I'm glad he hasn't come back, but I have this strange feeling he's still there, staring at me. It's hard to tell because the fog is thick, but I think I can see his two green eyes staring at me from the wall. It's got to be him, only he doesn't have green eyes. His eyes aren't green, dammit, they're red. He doesn't have green eyes at all, but there he is with green eyes and smooth hands and a soft Kentucky voice.

Kentucky. That's where I stopped first, in Kentucky. I was hot and tired and my radiator was hissing, so I pulled off into a dirt lot with an aluminum trailer and a broken neon sign that said "Eats." As I left the car and walked toward the trailer I could feel the drops peeling down my chest, streaking through the fine layer of dirt. I was hot; the diner was warm.

I don't know why this matters now, but I think it mattered a lot then. That girl behind the counter. I walked in and sat at that counter with my hands folded, never once taking my eyes off her. She brought ice water and smiled; one of those smiles that draws you in and melts your heart, like a magazine cover. Her dark hair swirled around her face and framed her perfect eyes. They were green eyes that never closed; eyes that held secrets.

Two men sat at the end of the counter, one in a white tee-shirt, and the other in a red, sleeveless Pendalton. I guess they knew the girl, because they mentioned something about her "daddy." I tried not to pay any attention, but I listened as hard as I could. They said something about someone named Joe, and how she'd be better off without him, but she just laughed and turned away. She came back to me and leaned on the counter like she wanted to talk, slowly polishing the stainless steel top. I could have watched her for hours, and she seemed to forget I was there. She just stared through the window with those big eyes, never blinking, seeing through everything, hypnotic. These were eyes that knew and understood. I didn't say a word, but they listened. They were eyes I'd never seen before and knew I'd never see again; wise and compassionate. They made me hate my wife without even thinking of her.

She stayed like that for awhile, until she accidentally knocked the salt shaker on the floor. The noise brought her back and she looked at me, startled, then relaxed, and she smiled.

We talked for about an hour. She asked where I was from, and why I'd stopped there and all the other questions someone who works in a trailer/restaurant will ask to kill time, and I asked the same of her, and we did, indeed, kill time. She was someone I felt strangely about; not that I loved, or even liked her, but just in that she made me feel different, like she was always part of me but never real. I'd ask her something, or tell her about myself, and she'd answer me in the most interested way, like I was someone. I remember how her eyes flashed when I told her I was going all the way to Texas.

"Texas," she sneered surprisingly, "there's nothing in Texas. Nothing but roads and dirt. A friend of mine went there a few years back, and I haven't heard from him since. Don't go to Texas."

She bit off this last sentence with a glowing intensity, and her eyes became enormous as she stared at me, as if she expected a change of mind. I smiled and looked at my water. She relaxed too and we talked some more. We talked about her home, and my home, and various other things. She asked me about my wife. My wife. Why did she do that? I wasn't thinking about anything but getting off the road. I came into that diner and found what I wanted: tables and chairs and water spotted knives rolled neatly in safe white napkins set on stainless steel counters. That's all I wanted, and that's what I found there. Then she had to mention my wife—my wife and my bills and my job and it was like choking on a piece of apple pie. I didn't answer her, and she turned away to talk to the two men as they were leaving. They said something about some place in town, then something about her "daddy" again, then something about her legs. Her legs, for christ-sake. They laughed hard about it and she smirked as the bells jingled when they went out. It was quiet, but the sound of those bells stayed in my head and got louder. They got louder and stronger, and I watched the two men get into their white pickup truck, still laughing. I felt as hot as the pavement outside, thinking of them talking like that to her. I paid my bill and stood by the register a moment. She stared through me. She stared for some time, then stated flatly "Don't go to Texas." I don't know why I said it, and I was surprised when I heard myself reply "Come with me." It was one of those moments when you act without thinking, and everything is natural. I didn't think twice about what I said, and she smiled

and looked at me with her green eyes, then turned and went into the kitchen. I threw a quarter on the counter and walked out into the heat with her gaze planted firmly in my mind. I drove to Arkansas.

That's it. I met her right before I drove through Arkansas, right before the road worker. The girl with the emerald eyes; sounds kind of like a song, or a movie. It makes things clearer though. I think I can remember everything now. I can't see the mouse anymore, but I don't think he was ever really there in the first place, just part of the fog. The walls are cool and thick and comfortable now. The green eyes aren't staring anymore. I think it's evening. There's a warm, orange glow to the plastic, like a sunset. I know what the sunset is. I know what happened during my last sunset. Very poetic: carried off into the sunset by green eyes and electricity. The hero, riding off into the sunset. A hero. Ha. But why not a hero? Why not? Dammit, because sunsets last less than five minutes and after that there's only dark.

I drove through the late afternoon Texas heat and could feel the dust on my face soak in. The radio was off, but the static was loud. I was numb, with the image of that highway patrolman fresh in my mind. Logic and reason meant nothing anymore. All I could feel was the road, with its heat and dust and static. I kept waiting for the road to open up and swallow me, unaware that it already had. All I knew was that my grip on the wheel was erratic and my foot wanted to accelerate. It's a feeling you can't even begin to comprehend until after you've stepped over that line of "rationality" and experienced it. Even if you want to, you can never go back.

Cars passed by now and then going in the opposite direction, and each time I watched my red hands to see if this was the time we'd slide over and end it, head on. But we didn't end it, my hands and I, and a sense of euphoric confidence replaced the sweaty grip as I headed for Austin.

I had a feeling I'd never make it to Austin, and I don't know what I'd have done if I did make it. I drove into the glaring orange horizon and pulled off almost instinctively into a vacant gas station. It was like stepping into a time warp, with the large, rounded pumps and white trimmed office. The place was desolate in the ocean of brush, and I waited in my car with the engine running, thinking about the sky in Rhode Island and the silverware in the safe white napkins and her green eyes and the cop. No one appeared for the longest spell, then an elderly woman in a pink and blue flowered dress came out of the office holding a Coca Cola. My grip was tight, but my mind waited. She glanced at me, then walked

right in front of the car, apparently looking for someone. Just to my right were the bathrooms, and she called toward them.

"Virgil, you in the john?"

Glancing back at me she waited, then started to walk towards the men's room, when the door opened and an elderly man with tiny round spectacles stepped out, wiping his hands on a white paper towel. For the first time my eyes filled with tears and everything became foggy. The sunset was just coming into brilliance when my foot hit the floor, she screamed, and Virgil was trapped between the bathroom wall and my bumper. Steam shot up from the hood as the woman tried to free the old man, who was slumping, bleeding from the mouth. I passed out with his image in my mind, aware of the hot tears all over my face, and aware of the bump on my forehead from when I hit the windshield. I hoped that bump was enough to kill me.

Well, the walls feel good now, and I feel safe. The mouse hasn't appeared for some time, and I don't think he will again. The guards are still here though. They walk by and jingle their keys and think they can see me, but, of course, they can't. One guard is there right now with my dinner tray. It has the same bread on it, but it's just ordinary bread now. He's saying something about my wife coming in the morning, but I'm lost in the wall, alone. I'm laughing at him. If he only knew how ridiculous he looks standing there talking to no one . . .

He's gone. My wife will be here in the morning and she'll try to talk to me and I'll stare at her from behind as she attempts to melt me with her glare. I'll laugh. Her world will never be the same. Neither will mine, but I realize it. It's going to the movies and discovering the world on the screen is real, and we're all characters watching life from a dark room with sticky floors. Perception is changed for good.

I opted for grey walls back in Kentucky. I'm at home in them now. I always will be.