The Trip Home

Bill Cunningham
Mr. Steven Jones felt the inescapable urge to sleep as he rounded the curve in the deserted highway. He had felt this familiar urge before as he had driven home from his many business trips. And being no stranger to the highway, he slowed down and rubbed his eyes with his fingers. They were red and sore and he glanced at himself in the rearview mirror. He adjusted himself in his seat and turned on the radio. A faint crackling came as he had difficulty in picking up a station. Frustrated, he gave up and clicked it off. He gazed out around him as the white lines in the highway zipped past with a rhythmic motion. The sky was beginning to darken into oranges and reds that signalled the coming of night. A few wisps of clouds that resembled mare's-tails dotted the horizon. Mr. Jones marveled at the beauty of the retreating day.

He topped the mountain at a leisurely pace and then started down into the valley below. The hill sloped gently down, down, down, into a valley that was surrounded on all sides by high mountains. And as he descended, the dusk became dark and the fullness of the night enveloped him. He glanced at his dash panel and noticed that he needed some gas. Being quick to realize the remainder of his journey was not brief, he resolved to stop at the first gas station and refuel himself and his car. He continued on into the night and suddenly his eye caught the shadow of a faint light up ahead. Thanking God for this oasis in the dark, he wheeled his car toward it with urgent ardor, praying all the way that it would be open.

His car began to cough just as he pulled from the highway onto the gravel lot of the small diner. Thank God, he thought, as his car died beside the lone gas pump. He got out and stood on tiptoes, reaching high in the air as he stretched his weary body. He shut the car door and walked around to the gas pump. He filled his car with gasoline and went to the front of the diner. The diner was a small building that had two very large picture windows draped with dirty white curtains. The front of the diner contained only a small sign which flashed the words Open 24 Hours a Day. When Mr. Jones looked at his watch, the illuminated hands read 8:00 o'clock. Mr. Jones apprehensively opened the screen door and walked in. The floor was tiled in a dingy looking gray that smelled faintly of mildew. A few small tables dotted the dingy floor. They were all naked except for an occasional ashtray. He also spied a bar to his immediate right. The bar ran the length of the diner and from behind the bar a voice said, "Can I help you?"

Mr. Jones turned, startled. His eye caught a man of medium height standing behind the bar with his arms folded. The man was attired in a white apron that looked like it had blood on it. His face was ruddy and his hair was greasy. His broad shoulders made him look strong but his eyes showed a peculiar weakness, not in keeping with the rest of his appearance.

Mr. Jones replied, "Yes, I was wondering if I could get something to eat?"

The man rubbed his hands through his greasy hair and propped himself up on the counter by his elbows. "Sure, if you can stand it."

Mr. Jones laughed and walked over to the counter and placed himself on one of the dusty revolving stools. The man behind the counter picked up a glass of water and a menu. He placed them in front of Mr. Jones and walked through a pair of swinging doors that led to the kitchen. Mr. Jones eyed the menu and decided to have a hamburger and a coke.

The man yelled from the kitchen, "Hey, Mac, what'll it be?"

Mr. Jones answered, "A hamburger and a coke." The man burst from the kitchen after a lengthy period carrying a lone patty of meat that was smothered in grease. Mr. Jones eyed the disgusting looking meal but decided to eat it anyway for he knew he had a long way to go.
The man behind the counter said nothing as Mr. Jones finished his meal. Mr. Jones wiped the corner of his mouth with a napkin and rolled off the stool. The man behind the counter walked silently through the swinging doors and over to the cash register. Mr. Jones paid him and started to go when the man slammed the cash register drawer shut and said eerily, "I wouldn't continue, if I were you."

Mr. Jones turned and with a surprised expression asked, "How come?"

The man took the towel off his shoulder and began to wipe the counter. He made no reply. Mr. Jones, overcome by anxiety, shouted, "Why can't I go on?"

The man stopped his labor momentarily and looked up. Mr. Jones met him eye to eye. The man only cracked a faint grin and returned to his duty of cleaning up the counter. Mr. Jones stormed out of the diner, turning over a chair and slamming the screen door behind him.

As he stepped through the door a sudden sense of cold gripped him. He noticed that the dew had fallen and it shimmered like a white blanket as the moon's reflection cast a shadow on the droplets. He rubbed his arms with his palms as he looked down the dark, lonely, desolate stretch of road that would soon engulf him. He turned and walked to his car. He took a final glimpse of the diner and he saw the man standing in the window staring at him, arms folded across his chest, glaring like a vulture. He hurried into the car and wheeled it onto the highway at a very brisk pace. He turned on the heater and the radio. He still had difficulty picking up a station so he turned it off. He tried to forget the man in the window. He tried to forget the evil in the man's glare. He lit a cigarette and he slowly began to relax.

As he rounded the next curve in the highway, he saw the distant glare of approaching headlights. He felt good at the visitor's intrusion for this would be the first car he had passed in over six hours. The lights began to grow brighter by the instant and suddenly Mr. Jones saw the car, approaching on the left and to the front. The two cars were almost one hundred yards apart when the oncoming car swerved violently into the path of Mr. Jones. The only reaction he had was to hit his brakes and cover his face in anticipation of the most violent and deadly of all automobile wrecks. The car rocked under the sudden halt and the tires ground angrily into the pavement. Mr. Jones thought of his family and how he would miss them. He thought of his wife and how they had been happily married for sixteen years while all of his business associates were getting divorced after five or six years. He clenched his teeth as he waited for the violent jolt forward that would come when the two cars collided. But oddly that jolt never came. He felt no pain and he heard no crash. He uncovered his face and peered into the blackness in front of him. There wasn't anything there. He got out and looked in all directions around his car. He saw nothing. Was it a mirage? He thought to himself, am I going crazy? He tried to laugh it off but he couldn't. He returned to his car and slowly accelerated off into the blackness. He wondered about the headlights and where they had come from. He kept remembering the man in the diner and wondered why had he warned him not to go on. His face became a mask of sweat as he peered into the darkness. He watched the full moon appear from behind a cloud. Perhaps he could find some condolence in its presence. He continued on down the highway. As he glanced up to his rearview mirror he saw the faint dim of carlights approaching to his rear. His nervousness eased a little. The car lights became distinctively clear as he peered into his mirror. The car lights were gaining on him at a very rapid pace and just as they were about to crash into his rear he slammed the accelerator to the floor. The car lunged forward but the car lights kept coming. Mr. Jones, in a fit of desperation, slammed his brakes to the floor causing his car to veer completely sideways in the road. He turned to his left and looked out his side window just in time to see the car lights descending directly on him. He covered his face and screamed a guttural cry of terror. The car lights were directly in front of the driver's side of his car not ten feet from his face. He screamed again as the car lights faded away. His heart beat loudly against his chest. His throat was dry and he trembled. He faintly thought he heard laughing. He heard the voice of the man at the diner laughing hysterically. He screamed, "Go away. Leave me alone." He covered his face. The laughing stopped and Mr. Jones slowly uncovered his face and looked up. There in the window of his car hung a pair of cold, bloodshot, hideous looking red eyes. Mr. Jones struck at the eyes with his fist screaming, "Go away, get away from me." The car began to rock and shake violently. Mr. Jones, sensing himself losing all control, shifted into drive and shot away. The eyes vanished and once again he was all alone on this deserted highway.

He pulled his car from the highway and stopped. He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette. He had difficulty in lighting it and his head reeled from the past few moments of hysteria. He fancied himself mad. This just can't be happening in the twentieth century, he thought. He had always thought of himself as a very rational man who usually had his wits about him. But this road and night were too much for him to bear. He clenched his fist and slammed the dashboard. He cursed the man at the diner but he vowed that he wouldn't win. He threw his half lit cigarette out of the window and boldly said out loud, "I'm not gonna stop for anything."

He pulled the gearshift lever into drive as he gripped the steering wheel. He burned rubber as he hit the pavement. His car accelerated to 60, 65, 70, 80 m.p.h. He rounded two sharp curves and peaked the top of the hill that sloped long and easily into the night. Below he could see the car lights round a curve. He clenched his teeth and came off the hill doing 80 m.p.h. The speedometer climbed to 85, 95, 100, 115 m.p.h. He laughed loud and loud that this time he would win. He bottomed the hill doing 115 m.p.h. He saw the two round circles of light ahead. The two cars met on a one lane bridge. The night sky was filled with a brilliant flash of red as the cars exploded on impact.

The impact was so great that the trunk lid of Mr. Jones' car was hurled 100 feet forward of the wreck. The cracking of the fire died down and the agonizing cry of the dying drifted away into the night. A small trickle of blood gathered at the corner of the bridge. Slowly and silently the bright red stream began to trickle into the brook below. The smoke from the wreck was whisked high into the air and carried off into the darkness. The souls of Mr. Jones and the other man might have been in this smoke. But as the smoke meandered across the road and surrounded the moonlit tree, the eyes hovered quietly surveying the scene. Satisfied they floated across the highway, past the smoldering wreck, and across the moonlit field.