

*Nicotine Traces*

*1,481 Words*

His finger flicked the tail and the ashes dissolved with the wind. The cherry flared a furious red as it was whipped by the passing breeze. Pulling his hand back, he left two fingers to guide the wheel while the others held the half-burnt cigarette. Unconsciously he moved to adjust his sunglasses. The sun was staring straight at him in its slow western descent. Averting from the angry yellow glare, his eyes took to the black pavement rushing beneath them. With his eyes focused on the road, he inhaled again and his mind wandered into memories.

*Her brown curly hair was twisted around her face. Hands caressing hands, lips kissing lips, they lay there naked. The air was sweltering, heavy with passion's sweat. Above them, an uneven fan flicked in endless circles. The room was stifling and the air hung tight, clinging to exposed skin. She leaned into him and stroked his hand. Guiding him, she ran his fingers through her hair. Untamed auburn rivers flowed around him. Sky blue eyes pierced him, seeking a silent answer; there was no escaping them.*

His hand grasped the wheel. Anxious fingers wrapped tightly on the worn leather, frayed and stripped raw from time. Cigarette ash collected on the dashboard. Blinking, his eyes burned. She reached over from the passenger seat and languidly laid her hand on his. Fingers stroked comfort into the back of his hand. Stealing a glance from the road, he looked at her. For a moment their eyes met and she gave him a reassuring smile that was returned, feeble and uncertain. The apprehension and dread roared in his skull but his mouth stayed silent. His eyes, hidden behind sunglasses, snapped back to the road ahead.

Like a blue bullet, the car raced across the desert highway. Near-forgotten storms rumbled behind them, taunting the still skies. The pavement cut through the plains, a knife through the heart of the west. Empty landscapes surrounded them. The endless flat broke only upon distant, hazy mountains. Muted brown sand dusted the road.

Cracking the window, he threw out the still smoking stub. A jealous wind carried it away. Within seconds it was gone, lost to memory. Returning to their place, his hands found ten and two. Unconsciously, his fingers began to tap an erratic rhythm.

One hundred miles left behind, one thousand miles ahead.

The sun fell fast. With its quickening descent, it screamed colors at the desert; atomic radiance exploded across the world. The most beautiful reds pierced the heavens, raining shades of crimson and blood-orange in their wake. Meeting the blue, the bullet car was washed, briefly, in poly-chromatic currents. The colors fought one another, sparring for control. Singing its swan song, the sun continued its plunge deep below the horizon until finally it was silenced by the night. The echoes of orange forfeited to the blue.

The small blue car rose with plateaus and sank with valleys. The straight road wavered into new shapes. Deceitful curves lay on the path, watched by attentive, mistrusting eyes. The steady

motor bumped and hiccupped over the occasional rock. High winds rammed its side, but the car kept course.

Next to him, she slept peacefully. Tousled hair was tucked under a white hoodie, pure and free of stains. A few stray strands lay across her cheek. Silent but for a few nightly murmurs, she was in blissful ease. Ignorant to everything around her.

His bloodshot pupils strained against the dark. Recklessly the wheels crashed against the road, as nervous fingers probed his pockets. After a lifetime of searching he found the lighter. The flame danced in his jittery fingers. The cigarette lit, and he inhaled. A cool mint calm rushed into his lungs. The dusk and its answers fell into the background, abandoned for old questions.

*The two of them were sitting on a park bench. The grass was lush green and the sky was baby blue. Her tiny hand crept across the wooden divide and crawled into his. Birds chirped and everything felt pleasant. Things were fresh, their relationship as young as the morning. All things simple and easy. Her auburn curls rested on his shoulder. Turning to one another they kissed, her lips a cool mint. He drank in her bright blue eyes. Smiling, they lazed in the easy sun.*

One thousand miles left behind, one hundred thousand miles ahead.

The evening was silent but for the sound of the radio. Hushed melodies filled the car. Lullabies drifted over the passenger dozing next to him. Her arm hung across the distance between them, resting on his knee. A far off boom sent a twitch through his being, and her hand fell. The soft tones of love songs were broken by radio static. A sense of urgency pushed his foot a little heavier on the pedal.

The blue bullet traced a narrow line as it climbed up the ridge. Directed by the guardrail, the track was set. But with time it faded into the cliff side and he was left without guidance. Along the edge of the road the asphalt collapsed and gave way to a perilous drop, the chasm calling from the unseen. Both hands held the wheel tightly, maneuvering with care. The tiny hairs on his knuckles stood at attention.

The storm was in raging pursuit. Thunder rolled ominously across the sky. In the rearview mirror a bolt of lightning crashed into ground. The winds howled a little louder and a little meaner. The cigarette was nearly whipped from his hand. Not yet ready to let it go, he held on. The intensity heightened, it was closer now. Night's dark looked to be an impenetrable wall of black. The headlights thrust against the enveloping shadows, fighting not to succumb to nocturnal storms. Now he could only see what was just in front of him. His mind urged otherwise, but despite his uncertainty, he lit one more cigarette. Its small flame looked defiant against the outer dusk.

*She was standing on the balcony, with her back turned to him. Coming up behind her, he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her neck. Laughing she tossed her flowing locks, the curls of her brown hair laying over his shoulders. Her curved body felt snug against him. Above them the moon smiled through a cloudy night. Later, smiles turned. He knew her uncertainty, struggling with his own. The demons of regret laughed at him. The gentle light was dimming, fading light of*

*a once happy affair — A sigh, a smile, a final kiss.*

One hundred thousand miles left behind, one million miles ahead.

The twilight hours were left on far-off trails. A small creek shepherded them down the incline. The sun began to drip golden light into the valley. As the basin began to overflow, he reached for his cup. Absently, he drank the cold coffee. Renewed vigor gave his eyes strength. Gentle hills tumbled over each other, just around the next bend. He could feel it.

The illumination radiated into the blue car. The beams tickled her face and unconsciously she turned towards him. As morning began to rise, he fished a fresh cigarette. The breeze spoke softly as he opened the window. Steady hands lit the memory.

*He did what he could to comfort her. Her appetite for anger made her inconsolable. Harsh arguments wrenched his heart. Once uncorked, the words could not be rebottled. Still he tried and tried. Brown curls pulled taut against her face. Blue eyes brimmed with blue tears. His eyes swelled with sorrow. Nothing to be done. Choices, once decided, cannot be undone.*

The golden solitary star now stood brilliantly over the horizon. Ashes drifted out the window while he put on his sunglasses. The world glowed radiantly in the confident morning. The wheels of the blue motor spun on even roads. As the last of the nicotine burned out, he discarded it to the mild wind.

Enriched with heavy sleep, a waking yawn purred from her mouth. Slowly she blinked away the last traces of dreams. The hood slipped off as she spread her arms wide; her straight blond locks were twisted in slumber's curls. Calmly, she sat up into a comfortable position. He looked over at her. The shades over his eyes made the natural lime tones of her eyes appear a dark forest green. With a smile, she reached over and massaged his hand on the wheel. He smiled back at her. She was happy with the things she did not know.

The bullet turned an azure blue as the sun chased clouds across the sky. The path seemed a little clearer, with the black highway stretching out to the horizon. The land whispered questions, asking where it was he was going. The only answer he knew was somewhere far, far from the past.

One million miles left behind, the infinite road ahead.