

# Warm beer and sweat dust back roads of desolation

*And I will never be set free/  
As long as I'm a ghost you can't see.  
"If You Could Read My Mind,"  
Gordon Lightfoot*

**Bill  
Allen**



"Boy, Nebraska sure is boring," she said, sitting on the side of the dirt road. "It is?" I said, looking off across the plains, where the buffalo used to roam

before Buffalo Bill killed them all in a fit of territorial jealousy.

Our tire was flat. We didn't know why. We were just 20 miles from Lincoln, but taking back roads through desolation.

Her name was Coco and I met her four weeks ago beside a small dust storm in California. We were traveling for free with my new good buddy Melvin Lloyd Peterson, called "Pete," and enjoying each other's company with a few all-American beers, my favorite brand, warm.

We had no spare. Pete wiped his forehead and shook the sticky sweat onto the trunk of the

car. He stood and watched it dry.

"Damn," he said, "Damn, damn, damn. How could any car not have a spare?"

He hadn't thought about it when he'd bought the car, a 1972 Ford Galaxy 500, for \$250 back in Great Falls, S.D. I guess he just assumed that every car had a spare in the trunk, waiting on the bench for the final minutes of the big game.

"Corn," Coco said. Then she stopped, her thought completed and just as well.

On both sides of the road, as far as we could see, was corn — row after row of brown, drying corn, burning under the hundred-plus temperature of the

Nebraska summer.

Pete moved his 270-pound 5-foot-10 frame around to the front of the car and lifted the hood. Then he walked around to the back door and scrounged around in the back seat until he came up with a piece of white cloth, which he tied to the antenna. It stayed there, having nowhere else to go.

He stepped back and viewed his desperation. His shirt, usually stretched tight across his enormous belly, popped apart and then hung limp on both sides. Pete crawled into the front seat, leaned back, and perspired.

The car's air conditioner didn't work. Neither did the radio. As far as you

could see on both sides of the road was corn.

We sat in the ditch, under a sign, because it blocked some of the sun from our faces and bodies. "NEBRASKA, THE GOOD LIFE," it said.

It was 2 p.m. and we had eaten a little over an hour before in Grand Island. Nonetheless, Pete peeled himself from the vinyl seat cover, leaned over, and opened the glove compartment. He pulled out two Snickers candy bars. He peeled the wrapper away from one of the melting sweets and put half of it into his mouth. He licked his fingers, smearing his face with chocolate in the process.

It was funny, in a nauseating way, but I didn't laugh. A ride was a ride, spare tire or no.

The sun was high, the sky cloudless, and no one came by for nearly an hour.

"I used to live here," I said, mostly to the sign.

"I'm sorry," Coco said. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."



"It's not that bad," I said. "It's not all like this."

"No?" she said, with sarcasm. "I went to college in Lincoln. We'll be there in an hour," I said. "I went to football games, and parties, and well . . ."

My words trailed off into a nostalgic past, wrestling with eternity.

"It's not all like this," I said.

Pete wheezed from the front seat. "I'm sorry," Coco said. "I'm just hot. It makes me irritable. I'm sure it was very nice."

I reached over and touched her hand.

"Someone's coming," I said, loud enough to arouse Pete.

It was true. Puffs of dust rose over the corn in the direction we came from. Several cars were coming.

Pete pried himself out of the car and stood waving his arms toward the approaching caravan.

"Pete, stop it," I yelled, softly.

"Why?" he said.

"It's a funeral."

A hearse went past, followed by a slow procession of immediate grief. People looked at us. We looked back. A pickup truck pulled over.

"I can take you into town," he said, "but it'll have to be after . . ."

"That's fine," I said.

We brought up the rear of the dusty line, feeling sad for a dead man who never knew us.

"Is Nebraska dull?" the preacher asked, in a booming voice that carried across graves to where we waited.

"It sure wasn't for Lester," he said, and he smiled.

"It sure is for me," Pete said.

"Shhh," I said.

"No," the preacher said, "Lester was too busy running a farm and raising kids and cows to be bored."

Someone sniffed loudly, sucking back a sob before it could leave.

"And he didn't sit around asking for something to do," the preacher said. "Lester lived life full from sunrise to sundown, and judging from the size of his fine family here today, he lived a little after sundown, too."

People smiled, gently. I did, too. I'd never heard anything like that at a funeral before.

"So we shouldn't grieve for Lester," the preacher said. "He's all right. He spent his whole life working for this reward. He's up there right now, reunited with his wife Wilma, and with the Lord. He's fine. I want you to know that not three Sundays ago he came up to me and said 'Reverend, I'm not scared to die.' He said 'I've spent a lot of years wondering what dying would be like, but right now it seems like a small matter compared to the things I know for sure.'"

Eventually, we got to town, got the tire fixed, and got a ride back. I put the tire on the car. Pete sat in the back and

See DULL on 59

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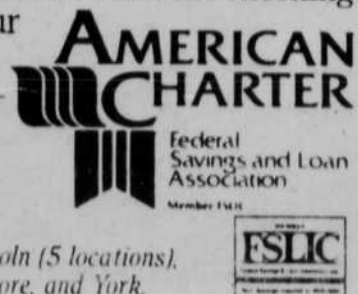
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