

Title: The Longest Stretch

Genre: Short Story

The sun sits high. Were it not for the consistent winds gushing over the hood and around the windshield, the rays would be scorching the uproarious occupants of a lone convertible truck cruising down the highway. Cotton puff clouds ebb and flow about the sky as though they were shifting notes of a musical score.

Lee reaches out hesitantly. His foot shifts to the break and slows the truck to a crawl. He turns the music down and the laughter between the two young ladies next to him subsides.

"What's wrong now Lee?" Shauna says looking past Kristy.

"Look at that tree over there. I swear I've seen it some miles back."

"Did you make a turn somewhere? Seems like we've been on a straight shot for a while now."

Kristy says looking around.

"No I didn't turn anywhere but that tree has three thick branches sticking out to the right and one that takes a very sharp right angle towards the ground." He replies.

"Maybe I should drive Lee. Maybe you and Kristy need to get some..." Shauna lifts her hands in air quotations marks. "Us time." She waves him over to switch seats with her.

"You're not driving my grandfather's car. It took me ten months to convince him to let me take it on this trip." Lee barks as he turns the radio up and pushes the gas.

Both girls giggle. Lee shakes his head and keeps his eyes forward.

"Tantrum much?" Shauna quips.

"Eat ass much?" Lee retorts with a snide glance. Kristy giggles with a tiny snort. Quickly she covers her mouth and nose only to giggle again followed by several uncontrollable snorts. Everyone in the truck begins to laugh. Kristy reaches out cupping Lee's face in her hand.]

"Shauna, you leave my budding artist alone. His grandfather's pride and joy is finally in the clutches of his fingers. He's not letting it go any time soon. I think by the time this shoot is over there will be more footage of the truck than there will be of me."

"Come on babe, you know I love you more than this truck."

"You didn't spend 10 months trying to get me."

"Well that's because you're easy like Sunday morning." Shauna says through a mouth full of potato chips.

"I didn't get caught in a stairwell with the Asian guy from down the hall. I wouldn't throw the easy word around so loosely... like yourself."

"Uhm BITCH, you hooked us up."

"I introduced you. I didn't pimp you. If that's what I did unknowingly, where is my money?"

"Stewie, Jezebel. Shut up. Look. FUCKING LOOK!" Lee points past the both of them towards a tree in the clearing."

"Dude that is NOT the same tree. You tripping."

"Yes it IS Kristy. What did I say? It has three thick branches sticking out to the right and one that takes a very sharp right angle towards the ground. I didn't say anything before because I thought what you're thinking."

"You don't know what we're thinking." Shauna puts her hand up to the side of her mouth. "He's crazy."

"Shut the fuck up Shauna. Look at it Kristy. There are three thick branches sticking out to the right and one that takes a very sharp right angle towards the ground."

"I see it Lee. I do. But that isn't weird baby. We're twenty-two hundred miles from home. This whole area is completely new to all of us. That's what road trips are about. Now we have our first something to tell everyone back home. We ran up on a stretch of highway that had the same weird shaped tree randomly growing." Lee exhales in excess. He hits the steering wheel repeatedly.

"FUCK FUCK FUCK. I know... I KNOW! Look I told you already, I've already been through that in my mind. I'm a writer, a film maker and I edit hours and hours and HOURS of footage dissecting the tiniest details for perfection."

"We know, we know. You're great, you're artsy. One day Lee Proust will be the next and future Andrew Lloyd Webber of cinema."

"Goddamn Shauna! How many times do I have to tell you to SHUT-THE-FUCK-UP?"

"Okay Lee, you're starting to get really rude over something very simple. You should apologize. She's only joking." The muscles tighten pulling the skin of Lee's jawline taut. He closes his eyes gripping the steering wheel. His long eyelashes slowly rise with another labored exhale.

"I don't mean to be a dick Shauna. I just know the weirdest shit is going on and you two are not taking the time to assess what I'm saying. There is a small tuft of grass about thirty meters to the right of the tree. It's the same also. It's different from the rest of the grass surrounding it. That can't also be a coincidence."

Shauna pats out 'Shave and a haircut' on the dashboard with the tips of her fingers. The two look for the patch of grass Lee had just described.

"You know guy. I forgive you. Don't make a habit out of it. I don't want Kristy to have to spank you."

"Really?" Lee rolls his eyes and presses on the gas. They ride along now in silence trying to mentally map the terrain. Lee taps the odometer to no avail. The numbers have stopped rolling. The sun, once seemingly shadowing them has now moved straight ahead. They drive on and the sun sinks further behind the mountains in the distance. A cascading vanilla sky ahead of them merges effortlessly into an expansive milky way behind them.

"Okay hot shot filmmaker. I have a simple idea. You have that drone. Fly it up into the air." Kristy smirks a bit then rubs his shoulder. "I know you might not appreciate the idea but just hear me out. Fly the drone into the air. Let me drive and you can record a much larger range of area as we move along."

Lee hits the breaks. Dust flies up surrounding the truck as he hops out and opens the trunk.

"I should have thought of that earlier, babe. Damn it. We don't have much time before the sun goes down. Lets do it." Kristy scoots over into the driver seat. Lee rifles through the truck digging out the drone and the huge remote control with the attached video screen.

"As much as that thing costs it doesn't have night vision?" Shauna asks.

"Yeah it does but that doesn't have the range as during the day. This will give me peace of mind."

"We've been driving by similar trees for 5 hours now. You really think nothing weird is going on?"

Before she realizes it, Kristy reaches out and slaps Shauna.

"What the fuck?" Shauna smacks her back. "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"Of course something weird is going on. Not only have we passed the same tree more times than I can count now. The second I thought to check how many miles we drove between each sighting the odometer stopped rolling. If you don't have anything helpful to add to the situation I think its best you keep your mouth shut."

"I think its best you keep your hands off of me or a bunch of trees will be the least of your problems."

Lee moves between the two women.

"As much as I want to see you two roll around... AND see Shauna get her ass beat. We don't have time for this. The tree was my first concern. Those mountains in the distance, they aren't getting any bigger. We aren't getting any closer." The silence between the three grew quickly and deafening. Lee knew what he had said had been noticed by all three.

"Maybe if I hadn't said it out loud. It wouldn't have been as true." He thought to himself. That possible reality was no longer an option. Grief weighed heavy on everyone.

"Okay, we can't stand here sad forever. Lee, get your drone in the air. Kristy grab the wheel. Lets see what we can see." Shauna unbuckles her seatbelt, stands in her seat and sits on the back of the truck. Lee launches the droid and joins Shauna as Kristy peels away. Steadily Kristy eases down the road. The buzz and hum of the droids propellers sound from above.

"There it is, up ahead." Lee says with a cold malaise.

The truck rolls to a stop. The tree sits off in the distance and the trio watches as the sun rays dance across the precipice before bedding behind the mountain. They sit in silence watching the amber crown fade allowing the vastness of space to blanket the heavens. Lee guides the droid to the bed top of his truck. He pulls the SD card and plays the video back on the handheld monitor.

They watch as the droid's footage shows them driving in a straight line for several minutes before they see Shauna pointing to the tree coming overhead. A faint growl sounds as a dark shadow streaks across the lower third of the screen.

"You see that guys?" Kristy asks.

"Just a video distortion from being so far from the remote. It was pretty high up." Lee answers.

"I don't get it. We drove all that time and nothing. Straight as can be and we end up right back here in this spot." Shauna adds.

"I get it. We're overthinking things. The video shows we kept straight. No turning, the road didn't curb. We're from a little backwoods town with no mountains no hills, no nothing. Who are we to gauge how far away a mountain is? Who are we to say it is or isn't getting any smaller?" Shauna looks at her watch, its 8:15 pm.

"Shauna, that doesn't make much sense. We're not idiots. This is not normal." Kristy says gripping the steering wheel.

"Kristy, drive the car. Just drive. Don't stop. Just drive. Hit the cruise control at sixty and leave it there."

Kristy complies and they drive. They come up to the tree and Shauna motions with her hand to keep at it. Kristy continues on until they come to the tree again. Shauna's fist balls up and they come to a screeching halt where they had originally started. The moon is full and the barren tree now casts an eerily long shadow. Its highest branches stretch out towards the street like prickly fingers reaching towards their prey.

"What was that about?" Lee asks. "We've gone exactly nowhere."

"The odometer went out. At sixty miles an hour from tree to tree took us 11 minutes that's roughly eleven miles. If we're stuck in some weird Bermuda triangle reality we at least know how far it is from end to end or beginning to beginning." Everyone's eye light and then dim quickly. Their brief victory over whatever is happening amounts to nothing. Lee grabs the plastic bag of trash from the floor of the truck and dumps it on the side of the road.

The girls look at him and then at each other in silence. Lee motions with his hand and Kristy peels away. Soon after they reach the spot and look to the side of the road.

Lee stands to his feet and leaps over Shauna onto the roadside. He looks around and kicks up the dirt.

"Fuck yeah! Okay Shauna. If Kristy would permit I'd kiss you. For once in your life you may have been right all along. No trash they just look the same."

"Lee, this isn't funny babe."

"I'm not kidding. Look for yourself. You saw me dump that bag of trash... It's gone. Maybe some jackass wanna-be Johnny Appleseed saw fit to perfectly space out some weird tree along this stretch of road. Whatever the case may be, this just proves I super over reacted."

"Even to the patch of grass?" Kristy asks.

"If some artsy fartsy idiot wanted to screw with people's minds they knew they'd have to do more than just the tree. There is nothing else out here so that lil patch of grass is the only other distinguishing mark. They got us and they got us good."

"He's right. The locals probably have a shop up ahead somewhere where we can fuel up and take a picture saying "I got dooped by the trees" or some shit." Lets just drive on and forget that for a brief moment we thought we were special enough to slip into some weird realm." Shauna offers motioning for Lee to return to the car.

"You can kiss her if you want. She probably still has egg drop soup on her lip." Kristy says with a giggle and snort.

Lee walks around the car and shoos Kristy over towards her friend. She lifts the remote and drone off the seat and hands it to Lee.

After placing the equipment in the truck he hops in the driver's seat and barrels down the highway. The radio comes back on and the three are lost in random conversation again. They ride for a couple hours and the car shuts down. The pedal presses back against Lee's foot. And the gaslight blinks on. Lee turns the key and the car screams to no avail.

"You have got to be kidding me."

"Is the battery dead?"

"Don't say dead on a dark road in the middle of nowhere Shauna." Kristy yells.

“Both of you shut up. Let me think.”

“What is there to think about? We’re out of gas and we haven’t passed an exit in hours. Where the hell are we. I tried the GPS on my phone long ago and can’t get a single bar.” Shauna says rolling her eyes.

“Okay, ladies. There is another one of those fucking trees. It seems easy enough to climb. Maybe I can catch a signal up in it.”

“Now whose dumb? And before you tell me to shut up, you jackass, that’s really dumb.”

“Until you have a better option, its happening so whatever.”

“Lee, you’re not leaving us in this car while you walk through a field to climb a tree.”

Kristy says scooting towards his open door as Lee gets out. Instead of opening her own door Shauna scoots across the trucks cab and gets out of Lee’s door also. Shauna slams the door and Lee gives her a harsh look. THUUUNK! Something smashes into the passenger side door, something big enough to rock the truck side to side. Shaun and Kristy both latch on to Lee who instinctively steps forward pushing both girls somewhat behind him with either hand.

“What the fuck was that?” Kristy says. Her voice is cracking as her words fade off.

“Shh. Whatever it was. It’s no longer moving. Get back in the truck.” Lee whispers.

Lee lifts the handle and slowly eases the door open. The ladies file in but stop in the middle sitting on top of one another. Lee eases around the hood of the truck peaking over the edge. The further he leans the more he grows confident in not seeing anything. Before long he has made his way to the passenger door. He looks around with a puzzled expression.

“Whatever it was, it’s gone now. First fucking animal we come across all day and it’s a goddamn Houdini.”

A rustling comes from the rear of the truck. Shauna swings the passenger door open and Lee hops in swinging the door behind him. He leans over the edge of the truck and looks towards the noise. Nothing is there.

“Hey, babe. Look, you said the drone has night vision. Turn it on and fly around a bit.”

“Its in the trunk.” Lee proclaims with the least bit of fear he can muster. He smacks the top of the trunk and leans over looking into the darkness. The cool night air is silent. The once fluffy clouds have become opaque scattered remnants of their former glory. The stars hang aimlessly. Lee climbs over the back of the truck and quickly retrieves the drone. He runs around the side of the truck and hops over the side and gets in.

The drone whirs up into the air. Lee guides it over towards the tree.

"Why is the drone headed to the tree?" Kristy asks

"I told you. I'm going to climb the tree to see if I can get a signal. The night vision will scope out any animals nesting around that tree, or in it. I don't want any surprises." The relayed video on the remote was choppy. The distorted images were ominous due to the grey scale.

"You're wasting your time. The moon is too bright. You'll never get good footage with it being so bright out here."

Lee grips the controller without saying a word. He begins to breath heaving trying to ignore his emotions to explode. Tunnel vision kicks in as he glares at the screen on his remote. In the distance the hum of the propellers can still be heard. Lee switches the night-vision off and tries to view the image with the moon's light. Something shoots past the screen and the hum of the drone dies. The image cracks and distorts before going black.

"What the hell just happened Lee?" Shauna screams at him.

"Fuck it. That thing's batteries died and it crashed. I'm about to climb that tree."

"You can't. You don't know what's out there and you can't leave us here."

"Kristy, you're gonna have to come with me then because that seems to be our only chance. Everything else is flat land."

"No we don't have to go. It's a convertible truck. For the love of God let the top up and close us in." Chimes Shauna, reaching for the button.

"That's really not a horrible idea. Ladies, I'll be right back."

"Use the flashlight on your phone."

"I will."

Lee runs towards the tree. He doesn't look left. He doesn't look right. With the tree just ahead Lee kicks it into over drive. He breaths in through his nose and out through his mouth. After several seconds of running Lee falls to his knees and begins to weep.

"What is he doing Kristy? Why is he stopping?"

"I don't know. Roll down the window." Shauna rolls down the window. Kristy leans over her and out of the window. "Lee! What's wrong? Why are..."

A shadowy figure flies past the window taking Kristy's head and shoulders with it. Her detached arms and lifeless body fall into Shauna's lap. Shauna screams. Lee can hear the screams but does not turn around. Shauna continues to scream uncontrollably as she pushes Kristy's lifeless and bloodied body away from her. It falls to the floor under the dash. Shauna crawls over into the driver's seat and pushed the power window button letting it back up. Her screams give her a headache and she passes out.

Lee wipes his tears and begins to laugh. In front of him, on the ground, he plays with a bag surrounded by trash. He holds a bottle up he had tossed out of the car along with the other trash and looks at the moon through the plastic container. Jagged teeth marks have ripped a huge chunk from the container. Lee tosses the container over his shoulder and a shadowy figure inhales the bottle and his hand as it passes by. Lee's quick scream of terror is quieted by another shadow figure taking off his head and shoulders as it passes from his right. The lifeless body slumps over.

THUNK! THUNK! THUNK! Shauna is awakened by something repeatedly crashing into the passenger side of the truck. She rubs her eyes sitting up against the driver's side door. THUNK! The truck shakes and she screams out looking through the darkness. She begins to kick and scream as her gaze falls to Kristy's arms, torso, and legs piled on the floor. The clouds shift covering the moon's glow. It's pitch black.

The clouds ease past the moon and it's light begins to illuminate a burly figure outside the passenger side window. It increases in size and diminishes slightly in a repetitive manner as though it's breathing heavily. As the clouds pass allowing more of the moon's rays to reveal the being the driver side window crashes open and a creature's teeth drag backwards tearing Shauna's head from her body.

The sound of gnawing at crackling bone and glass can be heard as the clouds drift over the shining moonlight removing all light from the horrible stretch of highway.