



Driving across the southern tier of New York State, Devin and Karen Thatcher were surprised at how deserted the drive was. The brand-new thoroughway, skirting the border of Pennsylvania, hadn't even been added to the roadmaps they had purchased at the gas station outside Chautauqua. It was built to provide a more direct line between the cities of Buffalo and New York, and would also provide more convenient access to the resorts in the Poconos for wealthy executives looking to decompress on the weekends.

For the past two hours, they had seen no other cars—not since that Citgo station where Karen picked up a few chili dogs, a Gatorade, and the useless map that now lay in a semi-folded heap on the floor.

"I told you that you should have filled up," Karen said, when the low-fuel indicator dinged on the dashboard of their old Civic.

"We had three quarters of a tank," Devin sighed. "Why would I?"

"For times like this." Karen thumped a pillow between her head and window. "Clearly you could have used that extra quarter tank now, couldn't you?"

"Says the person who always waits for the light to come on before filling up."

"Yeah, during the week—for work. I'm always less than a mile from a station—not to mention you need to make the most of those fuel perks."

"But this is New York. The Empire State."

"So?"

"You'd think if the state includes one of the largest cities in the world, that the space between metros might be a little less—"

"Empty?" Karen suggested.

"Sparse," Devin continued. "I mean, you'd think there'd be a gas station between Buffalo and Binghamton, at least."

"There was," Karen said. "That one outside Chautauqua. It had chili dogs."

Devin pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled in apparent acknowledgement of defeat. There was no point in arguing when Karen was so certain of herself.

The sun had long set, and with no traffic on this stretch of road, Devin had considered what his plan would be when the car stopped. Perhaps when their fuel was exhausted, he could call AAA. Then, glancing down at the cell phone in the cup holder, the display glowed with the words *no service*.

“Shit.”

“What?” Karen asked.

“Nothing.”

“No—there was something. What?”

“We’re in a dead zone. I don’t have any bars.”

Karen pursed her lips and nodded, but she said nothing. Instead she just nestled her head into the pillow tucked between her headrest and window and closed her eyes, pretending to sleep.

For 20 miles, Devin continued down the empty highway. No headlights pricked the darkness. There were no signs or mile markers, and no indication that they would be approaching any highway exits of any kind.

A soft clunk sounded from under the car’s hood, and the dashboard light let out a recurring ding. Devin glanced at the gauges, and stared at the impertinent lights. Running out of gas on the way to the resort for their honeymoon—his gut twisted with the thought that this might be some omen. Their first trip after their wedding and they would not make it to their destination.

Just as Devin lifted his eyes to the horizon, his headlights illuminated a rusted green sign that displayed the name of a village. Mud or corrosion obscured a portion of the name, so it read “Village of Ser__s.” Beneath it, scrawled in white letters, were the words “Population 22.”

As they passed the sign and followed the curve of the road around a stand of evergreens, the lights of an old service station flickered to life in the distance. Devin scanned the darkness for evidence of an off ramp—there was none. But a few hundred feet off, he could see the remnants of a gravel service road snaking its way from the shoulder of the highway, directly to a pair of gas pumps at an old service station.

Again the engine spat a series of dull clunks. Devin glanced at his cell phone, still glowing with the words “*No Service*,” weighing his options. He began to brake, signaled, and eased his car across the rumble strips onto the shoulder of the highway and down the packed gravel. At the sound of the tires crunching, Karen sat up and squinted through the darkness at the sight before her.

The timing could not have been more perfect, nor the grade of the road, or the hard-packed gravel that built it. No sooner had he nosed the car toward the glow of the service station than did the car offer up a chorus of violent sputters and coughs until the engine died completely. Devin stabbed the car into neutral and a combination of forward momentum and gravity eased the car down the slope until it came to rest in front of an antique visible fuel pump.

“Got lucky,” Karen said, unbuckling her seatbelt, opening the door, and stretching outside the car.

Devin sighed and pulled the lever beside the driver’s seat. The metal door of the gas tank popped open. With the initial turn of the gas cap, the seal hissed, and he propped the cap up on the trunk of the car. He reached for his wallet, but as he turned to face the pump, he noticed there was no credit card reader. Affixed to the face of the empty glass globe, a piece of yellowed parchment was obscured almost completely by a thick layer of dirt. Devin wiped his hand over the paper to reveal the message:

*Welcome to the Self-Serve Pumps
Cash or Trade Only
Sorry—No Credit
Please Pay Inside*

He flipped through his wallet. No cash, just a few rows of credit cards, which would have satisfied the requirements for any other gas pump in the world. But not this one. Devin glanced over his shoulder at the dimly lit store of the service station. He kicked a few rocks on the fractured pavement on his way to the door. He grasped the antique handle and rattled it on its hinges before noticing the greasy, handwritten sign in the corner of the window that read “Open Daily, 8:00 AM – 5:00 PM.”

Devin glanced at his cell phone, still with no service, but the clock registered 10:01 p.m. They weren’t going anywhere—at least not that night. Devin glanced back to Karen as she sank back into the passenger’s seat with a glare that said “Closed, huh?” He surveyed the parking lot, wandered around the perimeter of the service station until he found four additional buildings that he hadn’t seen from the highway. The first, a pole barn adjacent to the service station held a sign which read “Inventory,” but a little ways down the dirt road was an old motel, with the word “Vacancy” glowing green over its deteriorating façade. Across the street from there, a diner and Village Hall sat squat beneath the only working streetlight, casting a dim, yellow hue across the area.

Devin went back to retrieve Karen and their suitcase, secured the car, then carefully, the couple made their way to the motel. A white light flickered in the office and, when they drew nearer, they saw a wooden cabinet that housed the black-and-white picture of a Sylvania Superset tucked in the far corner of the

room. The door was open, and the couple stepped hesitantly across the threshold into an apparently empty room.

“Hello?” Devin called into the darkness. No response.

Karen glanced timidly around the space, inching closer to Devin until her arms wrapped around his elbow, above the hand that gripped the suitcase. He groped at the edge of the door jamb inside until his hand felt a light switch for the twin lamps on opposite corners of the front desk. Halfway between them sat an open ledger along with a handwritten note.

“Welcome to the Self-Serve Motel,” Devin read aloud. “We accept payment in cash and trade only and our honor system is strictly enforced. Payment is due at check out, and gratuity is greatly appreciated. Select from any of our available suites and we hope that you enjoy your stay. Sincerely—Management.”

Appearing in the ledger were the names of rooms: The Washington Suite (\$30/night), The Jefferson Suite (\$22/night), Revere Room (\$15/night), Ocean Room (\$10/night). Devin scanned the options and turned to Karen.

“What do you think?”

“Well, at least it’s affordable,” Karen answered, glancing at the ledger. “What does it mean though—cash or trade only?”

“No cards, I guess,” Devin answered, rereading the note. “Well, I can always find an ATM before we checkout—I’d bet they have one in the gas station. I’ll just grab some cash in the morning and square things away before we hit the road.”

Karen surveyed the lobby of the office once more. Everything seemed dated—the red velvet tapestries that hung by the windows and doorways, the old television in the wooden box, and the gold fleur-de-lis pattern lain into the faded blue carpet. Still, she ran her fingers across the desks and the lamp nearest to her—no dust. Yes, everything was old, but quite clean.

“Well, I suppose it will have to do for the night. It’s not like there are any real options.”

With a half shrug, Devin grabbed the fountain pen that lay in the crease of the open ledger and scrawled “Devin & Karen Thatcher” in the column beneath the heading that read “Washington Suite.” He then retrieved the corresponding key from the cupboard fixed to the wall behind the desk, grabbed his suitcase, and he and Karen stepped outside.

Devin scanned the doors until they came to the end of the building where he finally found a small shingle that read “Washington Suite.” He inserted the key into the lock, heard it engage the tumblers, and felt the heavy deadbolt slide out of place. They pushed open the heavy wooden door and switched on the lights to reveal a modest sitting area, a canopy draped over a down mattress, and a threadbare quilt folded opposite a mound of pillows.

Through the open bathroom door, Karen caught a glimpse of a deep, claw-foot tub. She moved cautiously through the room and into the bathroom to examine the

pristine tub. Beside it was a cabinet with glass doors, through which the bottles of bath salts, shampoo, and stacks of wax-paper wrapped soap bars were visible. Beside them rested a basket with a small note which read:

*Self-Serve Toiletries
Each Item 10¢
Cash or Trade Only
Sorry—No Credit
Gratuity Required*

In the sitting area, Devin examined the old Philco resting next to the brick hearth of a coal-burning fireplace, a bucket-full of shimmering black fuel waiting in the steel pail between the two. Facing the radio, two feather-stuffed armchairs were split by an end table supporting an empty tea tray.

Devin heaved the suitcase to the chaise beside the bed just as Karen began filling the tub.

“It’s been a long day,” Devin said slipping into a pair of pajama pants and an old stained t-shirt. Karen offered a non-committal hum, and began peeling off her layers. “I think I’m going to hit the bed,” Devin continued.

Karen scattered lavender-scented salts from the cabinet into the tub, then tested the water with a pointed toe before slowly slipping under the surface—first her feet, followed by her legs, torso, and breasts. Devin peeked just as the displaced water lapped at Karen’s chin, noticing her nubile breasts floating seductively. Her eyes were closed and she let out a contented moan.

“So,” Devin began, “you coming?”

“Eventually.”

“See, I was hoping—,” Devin paused. “You know—our wedding night.”

Karen opened her left eye and peered passively at her new husband.

“All the signs here say ‘self-serve,’” Karen said, in flat tone. “I’m sure you can work something out.”

Devin’s jaw slackened then flexed, as though it were trying to mouth a response that would not fully form. He swallowed and drew in a deep breath as Karen closed her eye again.

“Guess you’re probably tired. I’ll see you in the morning then?” he asked.

Karen grunted an acknowledgement. Devin turned out the main lights in the room and slipped beneath the covers of the old bed. He tossed a bit, pounding his fists in the pillows before settling in. It was slow coming, but eventually sleep over took him.

Karen prolonged her soak, occasionally pulling the plug to drain the colder water, and opening the hot tap to bring back her desired level and temperature. Whenever she did this, she added another dash of the aromatic salts and stretched muscles that had been cramped in the car for most of the day. Not since

her childhood was she able to stretch out in the tub like this, and fully relax in its contents. For that moment, she thought it was even worth running out of gas on this desolate highway—but she was not about to tell Devin that. When she was sufficiently wrinkled, she stepped from the tub, dried and donned her night shirt, and folded herself into the bed. With a satisfied sigh and murmur, she fell fast asleep.

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When Devin awoke the next morning, he knew he had been dreaming. It was an odd, mildly confusing dream in which plethora of disembodied voices rasped the word *service*. He knew there was more to it, but the more he fished for it, the further away from his consciousness the dream slipped, until even that all important word, *service* had dissolved first to a hiss, before vanishing completely from his mind.

The midmorning light gleamed through the crack in the curtains, and Devin kicked himself out of bed and made his way to the bathroom. There, a pull-chain reservoir was mounted high on the wall, with a thick, lead pipe running down to an antique toilet bowl. As he relieved himself, he studied the mechanism, pulling the chain tight, feeling the weight of it, lifting it just enough for a small amount of water to leak into the bowl below. He listened to the sound of water trickling in then stopping as the valve opened and closed. When he finished, he flushed and felt the satisfying surge of water through the pipe and the forceful evacuation of the urine-filled bowl, and watched as the basin steadily refilled.

The oddities of his room were apparent the night before, but now that he was rested, every eccentricity seemed more interesting. On his way back through the room, he clicked the knobs of the old Philco, the tubes whirred as they warmed and soon what sounded like a bees wax recording crackled through the speaker and the distinctive sound of old-timey blues came through.

“Hired him a taxi, say can’t you drive me back to Maine? Oh, yeah. I’ve done a hanging crime yet I don’t never feel ashamed,” the voice of a man crooned through.

Perplexed, Devin paused and listened as the song concluded when a new voice broke the silence, to identify the song as Blind Willie Walker’s new hit “Dupree Blues.”

The sound of the radio caught the ears of Karen, and she began to stir in the bed across the room. Devin clicked the knob again and stepped over to the suitcase on the chaise. He pulled on a pair of jeans and slipped on his sandals.

“I’m going to go over to the gas station and see if they have an ATM,” he said.

“Mmhmm.”

Devin stepped out of the door and took in the landscape. In the distance to his left, there was a meadow separated from a stand of trees by a thin river. In front of him was the end of a gravel road or parking lot, and to his right, a small dust covered diner across another gravel lane at the end of the motel. He went to the main road that he and Karen had walked down before and saw the old pole barn behind the service station. He walked over to the structure and peered through the crusted

windows. Reinforced, iron shelves lined each of the long walls, supporting cars. Among them, Devin could identify a 1943 Chevrolet pickup, 1973 Barracuda, and a 1970 CJ-5 jeep, all dust-covered on the bottom row approximately 2 feet off the ground. Above these, a 1966 Shelby Cobra and '84 Lotus Eclat appeared suspended in time, freshly washed, waxed—the chrome detailing glinting, even in the dimly lit space. On the short wall opposite the window he peered in, a service door split a work bench, containing miscellaneous parts. It was a curious scene, compounded by the fact that there was no garage door, or any other entrance large enough to accommodate the vehicles, as though they were assembled inside, directly on the shelves that supported them.

Devin turned and continued toward the service station. As he approached, the front bumper of their car peeked around the edge of the visible pump where they had left it the night before.

He made his way to the station and tugged on the door handle. It swung open easily and he made his way to the counter.

“Hello?” Devin asked. “Anyone here?”

Again, there was no answer. Devin looked around the cramped storefront. On the counter, he noticed a note next to a basket. The note read “Welcome to the Self-Serve pumps. We accept cash or trade for products and services of equal or greater value. Sorry, no credit. Our honor system is strictly enforced. Gratuity is mandatory. Thank you and enjoy your day! – Management.”

Devin glanced around. The wall behind was filled with packs of Camels and Lucky Strikes, bordered by packages of Mail Pouch tobacco and cans of snuff. The small storefront had a variety of other products—funnels, hoses, spark plugs. On the side of a display a flyer read “For specialized products, see our warehouse inventory.”

There was no ATM and no evidence that there had ever been one. Behind the counter, there was no credit card machine—not even an old carbon copy card reader. He had money tucked conveniently away in a bank back home, but it would do him little good here. Finally, he made a decision to try the pump and see what happened.

Along the side of the pump was a handle. Devin tried it, pushing it back and forth. An amber liquid flowed in to fill the glass cylinder. He placed the hose into the tank of the old Civic, opened the valve and 5 gallons of gas flowed into the tank. He went back inside, glanced around the storefront again. Still, nobody staffed it. There were no cameras. No witnesses. Finally, Devin climbed into the car, cranked the engine a few times until the fuel started flowing and he drove back to the motel and parked outside the Washington Suite.

Karen was awake, returning the last of her things to the suitcase.

“I hear you got the car running again.”

“Yeah.”

“Hope they didn’t price gouge. Things are usually a lot more expensive in these little towns.”

“No. Nobody was there. Pumps were unlocked so I filled up.”

Karen zipped up the suitcase and pulled it off the chaise.

“Wait,” she said, registering Devin’s comment. “So how did you pay?”

Devin shrugged. “Didn’t.”

“Devin! You can’t just drive off without paying. That’s stealing.”

“What am I supposed to do? There’s no ATM, I have no cash—and it beats the hell out of me what this whole ‘trade’ thing means.”

“Well you should at least leave a note. Explain that we will wire them the money when we get home.”

“Wire who the money? There’s nobody here.”

“Then give them our address and ask them to bill us.”

“Fine. You want me to leave a note, I’ll leave a note. Let’s just drop the room keys back to the office and get moving.”

Karen shot Devin a scowl but seemed satisfied with this. They tucked the covers over the bed and walked down to the motel office. In the open ledger, under their names were a few lines under the heading “Notes.” There, Devin scrawled “Please send bill to Devin & Karen Thatcher, Apartment 12, 202 Ginger Hill, Slippery Rock, PA, 16057.”

He closed the ledger, replaced the keys on the hook behind the front desk. Then, he and Karen gathered up their bags and stepped back out into the sunlight. No sooner had their eyes fallen on their car, than did something appear immediately wrong. It appeared that one side of their car was lower than it had been moments earlier.

“What the—” Devin began, but stopped short, as he rounded on the car.

Both of the wheels and tires from the passenger side were gone. The steel assembly of rotors and brakes was sunken into the gravel parking space, as though the car had been in that state for hours. A note flapped under the windshield wiper. Devin ripped it from the car and extracted a short letter from inside, and read.

Notice of Violation:

Dear Mr. & Mrs. Thatcher:

You are guilty of the following violations of Village Honor Code:

- VHC § 104 – 331: Theft of product or service (Self-Serve Pumps / Diner)
- VHC § 602 – 001: Unpaid gratuity for services rendered (Self-Serve Motel / Diner)
- VHC § 011 – 235: Unlawful extension of unsecured credit (Self-Serve Motel)

The following property has been seized in trade for products and services rendered, as well as processing fees and fines administered from the Village Council:

- 2 aluminum alloy wheels (Trade value \$30)
- 2 steel-belted, all-season radials (Trade value \$15)
- 2 hubcaps (Trade value \$2)

Under VHC § 770 – 112, your presence is required for a hearing at Servus Village Hall at 12:00 PM today. Failure to appear will result in a warrant for your return and a forfeiture of all property, both seized and unseized within the jurisdiction.

Thank you for your cooperation.

—Management

Immediately Karen started in on Devin.

“If you hadn’t taken that gas,” she said.

“Look again. Your ‘just bill us’ note didn’t work either.”

For a moment, Karen’s face flushed. Her shoulders heaved with rage.

“If you would have filled up in Chautauqua,” she finally said.

“Then we would have run out of gas further down the road, wouldn’t we. Did you see any signs for exits coming up? No. We would have just kept driving, and been trapped on the side of the road. You wouldn’t have had your bath—a nice bed to sleep in for the night.”

“But I wouldn’t be trapped in whatever this place is.”

Devin kicked the car door.

“This was a mistake,” he finally said.

“Clearly. This town—”

“This marriage.”

Karen looked as though she had been slapped. Her wide eyes welled with tears and she gasped. “Screw you, Devin.”

Karen slumped on the ground next to the car. Devin knew he had crossed a line but had no idea how to take it back. Then, thinking it would be best if they both could cool off, he left her and the car, and took a walk along the gravel street.

Devin watched the time closely, and arrived alone at the Village Hall just after noon. On the counter, just inside the door, he found a large manila envelope with his and Karen’s name on it. He opened the package and read carefully.

“This court finds you, Devin and Karen Thatcher, guilty of three counts of theft-by-indifference, and one count of failure to appear. The defendants are hereby bound to Servus, forfeiting all rights to personhood and property. It is so ordered by Management.”

Something churned inside of him. He could not make sense. A ruling without a trial, with no representation, judge, or appeals process. All he knew was that he and Karen had to get out.

Devin ran back to the car—but the car and Karen had vanished without a trace. He ran through the gravel streets, peered through the dusty windows, but there was no sign of where Karen had gone.

Exhausted, Devin returned to the pole barn where he had observed the cache of old cars earlier. He ran across the road to the narrow field that separated the service station from the motel, making a beeline for the deteriorating gray structure that read “Inventory.” It was locked. Devin slammed his shoulder into the door and heard the metal creak under the stress. He backed up and kicked just below the door handle. He repeated this, mustering more vigor with every blow until, finally, the metal fatigue gave way and the door flung open.

He stepped into the shadows flanked by the shelves of cars he spotted earlier. Skimming the inventory again, Devin noticed a new vehicle—their green Honda

Civic, resting on the top-most shelf in the back of the structure, next to the Lotus. It was well out of reach, but on the bottom shelf, sitting only feet from the ground, was a rugged-looking CJ-5, with large mud tires and a lift kit.

Against the far wall were work benches with built-in cabinets. He rummaged through their contents searching for keys, only to find none in sight. At last, Devin noticed a set of rusted, antique screwdrivers, sitting on the back of the bench. He seized one and walked purposefully back to the old Jeep. He clamored up the shelf and into the car. With a firm thrust, he stabbed at the ignition and jimmied it, until the steering wheel lock gave way, and he felt the screwdriver turn. He heard the battery spark as it engaged the starter. With a shudder and a belch of blue-gray smoke from the exhaust, the beast roared to life.

He punched the Jeep into gear and recklessly nosed it over the edge of the shelf, turning it toward the bank of windows next to the door. He gunned it, tearing a hole in the steel and shattering the glass in the windows above.

Devin tore once more by the motel and through the field in the direction of the river. Seeing no evidence of Karen, he sighed, pulled a U-Turn and shot up the gravel service road and onto the fresh blacktop of the highway. In his rear-view mirror he watched as the service station vanished behind him. He raised his eyes to the horizon, the thick mud tires humming against the blacktop. As he tore down the road, he approached a curve around an oddly familiar stand of evergreens which gave way to another service station in the distance, and an old, corroded, green sign which read "Village of Serv_s Population 23."

"Shit," Devin said, slamming on the brakes. Then, without a second thought, tore across the median of the new highway and floored the old Jeep in the opposite direction. A ways down the road, he approached another service station with yet another sign announcing the Village of Serv_s.

His mouth was dry, as he shot past it, and fiddled with the radio dial, attempting to channel something, anything that could transcend his surroundings. The "Dupree Blues" sounded from the Jeep's stereo. Again he turned the dial, and Willie Walker's voice faded out, then came back into focus. He tried to turn off the radio, but the switch would not respond. The voice of Blind Willie Walker continued on.

"Then they went to the jailer, crying jailer please. He went to the jailer, crying jailer please. Please mister jailer, let me see my used to be."

As the guitar played out the end of the song, background voices began to ascend to the front. At first, Devin heard whispering, but once the song concluded, the voices grew louder and louder until a velvety chorus reverberated through the sound system, tickling his inner ear and causing the hair to rise on the back of his neck.

“Your crimes have bound you to us,” the voices seethed. “You are no longer entitled to who you once were. You are part of Servus—and you will serve us.”

Devin attempted to turn off the radio, but the voices would not stop.

“You must remit what is owed to us—you are of Servus—serve us. Serve us. Serve us.” As they repeated, the voices began to peel back, one-by-one. Male, then female, and genderless child until the voice of Karen was all that remained.”

“Devin,” she said, “you must remit what is owed to Servus. You must serve us.”

The sun was setting as Devin sped his CJ-5 past a late model Prius moving down the same highway, a couple inside bickering. As if he could not see it, Devin did not slow down. He simply sped around another curve that hugged a group of evergreen trees and was gone.

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Just as the sun slipped below the horizon to the west, Justin and Carol Barnett were too busy bickering over their dashboard lights to notice an old Jeep thunder past.

“I told you to fill up before we left,” Carol said.

“It was almost full,” Justin answered.

The engine died just as they came upon a sign that read “Village of Servus population 24” and saw the dim glow of an old service station flicker to life, a CJ-5 parked next to a pair of antique, visible gas pumps, and a gravel service road snaking its way from the highway. On nothing but battery power, Justin edged the car onto the service road.

“You got lucky,” Carol said. She glanced over her shoulder at their daughter, fast asleep in her car seat. “We could have been stranded out here for forever.”