

Technicolor Nowhere

by Zephram Farrington

A sun-ravaged Sunday afternoon in July found me walking west on the shoulder of route 271. Rather than letting a Greyhound scheduling SNAFU strand me in Spiro, Oklahoma, I had taken the journey into my own hands, hoping to hand it off to some friendly motorist along the way. With my worldly belongings on my back, I strode toward San Francisco, my brother Arthur, and a brand new life in sin.

Air rising off of the asphalt distorted the hills of drought-dead grass beyond it. Music from 'The Good, the Bad and the Ugly' spun through my head and I caught myself scanning the landscape for the bleached skulls of cattle or men.

A head of black hair did me no favors under the merciless gaze of the sun. A wiser man would have brought a hat; a wiser man would not have dropped out of college; a wiser man would have known better than to fall in love with the stroke of a brush—among other things. Three-and-a-half hours of walking saw a score of cars speed past me while the sun sank toward a horizon that grew not one inch closer.

I sat down on the edge of the pavement and dumped lukewarm water down my throat. As I appraised the water level in my canteen, I came to the realization that I was seven miles from nowhere with night falling fast.

The rumble of approaching tires reached me through the asphalt before the engine could be heard, and I jumped to my feet. I would have been willing to accept any ride—even back to Spiro—but luck had the driver heading my way. I thrust my thumb westward as the white Ford Taurus approached, slowed and passed me. I stopped walking and eyed the shrinking vehicle with shameless reverence. Right when I was ready to relinquish any hope of salvation, the car

coasted to a graceful stop, then kicked into reverse.

The fellow who picked me up was named Earl, a proudly self-identified Texan, and looked just about old enough to be my grandfather. Broad and heavy—not unlike his vehicle—he easily dwarfed my wiry five-foot-eight. He squinted into the solar glare without the aid of sunglasses, which gave him the aspect of a gunslinger from an old cowboy flick.

His radio station of choice cycled through ballads of ruined lives, and a desiccated coyote's paw hung from his rear view mirror—killed the varmint himself, right in his backyard. Seeing as my East Coast sensibilities weren't likely to make me popular with him, I decided to spend the rest of the trip with my mouth firmly shut. After the sun had gone and taken the shaded red glow from inside my eyelids, I slept soundly for a time—until the Name of the Lord jarred me awake.

"Jeeeeeesus!" Earl's Texas drawl made his blasphemy hilarious. The car swerved, its tires wailing their lament at the road.

My vision returned in time to show a sky ashen with clouds and the terrified face of a redheaded teenage boy in the headlights. Earl muscled the car to the left and jammed on the brakes, but didn't have nearly enough room to avoid the kid. The right side of the bumper clipped him and he jolted across the hood, exploding into a messy smear of liquid vermilion against the windshield.

I heard Earl suck in a truncated breath. The seat belt locked, halting my body's forward progress but not doing anything to prevent lateral movement. The last thing I remembered hearing was the thud of my skull against the passenger window.

Tap. Tap. Tap-tap. Tappity tappity tap tap tap. On the inside of my eyelids, I could almost see the dead boy's bloody fingers drumming against my window. Soon, though, it became evident that no boy, roadkill or otherwise, could have *that* many fingers, and the thought of rain brought me back to life. Neither my head nor the glass it leaned against had given way. The windshield looked so clean that for a moment I considered writing off the incident with the boy as a nightmare.

Rain cascaded over the windows ceaselessly, and beyond the water-blurred glass the headlights still carved twin cones of glowing raindrops out of the darkness. The car sat nearly perpendicular to the lines on the road, four cylinders churning idly. A wave of vertigo challenged my college-honed stomach.

Beside me, Earl had not moved or showed any sign of acknowledging my wakefulness. His head rested atop the steering wheel as though his neck were too tired to hold it up. My own neck ached in fervent sympathy. The instrument panel clock claimed it was 10:13, but that didn't help—I hadn't thought to look at the time while we were busy running down pedestrians.

"Earl, man...what happened?" The storm rattled on the roof and the engine purred. "Earl?" I put a hand on his shoulder. His cerulean polo shirt, still damp with sweat, felt unnaturally cold, and his limp flesh reminded me of half-dried sculpting clay.

"Jesus," I echoed his last word, opened the door, struggled out of my seatbelt, and tripped over my knapsack on my way to the wet pavement. I heaved for almost a solid minute, but couldn't convince my stomach to eject its load of acid and bile.

Rising, I walked all the way around the Taurus. I discovered no sign of the teenager's broken corpse, though I did find a dent on the bumper. The ditches to either side of the road

yielded no more clues as to the boy's fate, and I could only guess that he somehow survived the collision and dragged himself off somewhere. Rain worked its way through and under my denim jacket, mocking my steady perspiration. I opened the driver side door, turning to Earl for ideas. He looked like a botched wax statue: tanned, textured, but bloodless. His right arm lay across his thigh, clutching a small white pill bottle.

"I'm sorry, man, but I can't let you drive any further," I grunted as I deposed the decomposing driver. He was not a small man—about as easy to maneuver as an oddly shaped two hundred and fifty-pound sack of sand. I had to settle for half-rolling, half-kicking him into the back seat. By then I was thoroughly soaked and shaking, barely possessing enough coordination to dig a dry t-shirt out of my knapsack. That it turned out to be my studio shirt—acrylic-stained from two semesters of painting—offered me a slight measure of solace.

The pill bottle had slipped from his grasp during transit, and I retrieved it in the dubious hope that wasn't excessively illegal. Walgreens brand acetylsalicylic acid: generic aspirin.

"Fat lot of good that did. Should have gotten Bayer." I sighed, tossing it into the back with Earl before climbing into the driver's seat.

I turned on the windshield wipers and briefly considered trucking back to Spiro. That seemed like the sanest thing to do, but the next town *might* be closer—and certainly Earl wouldn't care either way. I cranked the car around and headed west again, straining my eyes through the rain and stopping only once to borrow a couple of aspirin from Earl.

Five minutes down the road I was finally prepared to give up. I kept catching glimpses of my father sitting in the passenger seat, calmly explaining that painting was a hobby, not a career, or Mom desperately leafing through the pamphlets for that camp that she hoped would fix me. The coyote's paw wiggled and writhed, longing to run free once more. Rain still kept

coming down with Biblical determination, my head throbbed, and the word 'concussion' knocked around inside my skull. I parked on the shoulder and tried for five minutes to light a damp American Spirit before passing out again.

Staring at the whitewashed ceiling, I could not fathom where my Jim Morrison poster might have gone.

"Art...? Ah, hell," I growled, rolling over to reach for the alarm clock. It wasn't where I had left it. "Arthur, man, could you get me some Adv—" A full view of my surroundings stole the words from my half-open mouth: no week-old pizzas, no towers of Mountain Dew cans and CD-Rs, no boxes of computer parts or heaps of dirty laundry, and no brother or roommate. Instead, I gazed upon what looked like the set for some day-time television drama's interpretation of a guest room: white linens, white curtains, an electric fan stirring warm air, a little nightstand supporting a glass of water and an old-fashioned electric analogue clock. The chair with my jacket draped over it made everything real for me again.

"Well, Mal," I muttered, "we're not in Blacksburg anymore." A head of wavy brown hair peered in through the open door, withdrawing almost immediately from view again.

"Mother!" a young woman's voice called out in the hallway. Her voice made my headache worse. I wished I had stayed in Spiro and slept in the damned Greyhound station. Maybe I could have talked Emmalee into letting me stay on her couch. Or I could have gone back home and to that damned camp, so I could return to VT in the fall with a major that Dad could countenance paying for. It might have killed me inside, but at least I would not have to

deal with the two women standing in the doorway.

The one attached to the brown hair I had seen a minute ago looked in her early twenties. She was hiding behind an older woman with a thin flaxen braid hanging over one shoulder and a steaming bowl in her hands.

"Good day, young man." She forced a polite smile and stalked across the room, positioning the bowl on the nightstand. "I'm sorry we haven't anything better. My husband will speak with you when he returns." That said, she all but fled from the room, relieved that her duty was done.

The brown-haired girl lingered on the threshold, fixing a pair of dark-chocolate eyes on me like a child at a circus. I felt a bit naked and not terribly hungry, but took the bowl anyway. A couple of spoonfuls later, my trained palate discerned that I was eating Campbell's condensed chicken noodle soup sans the extra can of water.

"Miss," I mustered my best Good Boy voice, "might I trouble you for some aspirin or Advil?"

For a moment I saw no reaction and wondered if she had understood me, but at length she nodded and padded out into the hallway. I sat up straighter, making the bed dip and roll beneath me in a conspiracy with the briny soup to trick me into sea-sickness.

The girl returned with a handful of round white pills, which I received, carefully ingesting only two. She didn't leave, but retreated to the foot of the bed, hooking her thumbs through the belt loops of her threadbare Levi's.

"Thanks, Miss...what's your name?" I asked around the awful aftertaste of the saline swill I had suffered to wash the aspirin down with.

"Kelly," she sounded younger than she looked. The white 4-H t-shirt she wore was

hemmed to the waist of her jeans as though she had wanted to show some mid-rift but could not bring herself to do it right.

"My name is Malory," I announced with what I hoped was a winsome smile, "not from that sit-com, like Sir Thomas Malory, you know?" Her expression suggested 'no'. "My friends call me Mal."

"Pleased to meet you, Mal," she replied mechanically, glancing at the curtains. The rumble of a pickup truck approached, slowed and died out. Two car doors slammed, followed briefly by the front door opening and the surreptitious counsel of low voices. I looked around for my knapsack—which was nowhere to be found—then at the window, and finally back at Kelly.

She frowned, averting her pretty dark eyes the way people did when they passed by homeless people. "Excuse me," she blurted, spinning on her heel and loping out of the room in an arc of brown curls.

By then my Spider Senses were telling me to beat feet out of Dodge—or wherever it was I had ended up. My head and stomach objected vehemently to anything involving movement, but I stood up in spite of them, steadying myself with a hand on the bed. Two men clothed in similar—but not matching—plaid shirts and blue jeans appeared at the doorway. One of them looked distantly like Kelly, the other like Ronald Reagan before his hair went grey.

"Are you Malory Flynn?" the Reagan look-alike said, holding out my wallet as though he were giving alms. He reminded me of my father, which got him filed under 'asshole' before I even knew his name.

"Yeah." I retrieved my wealth and identity, reflexively flipping open the wallet to ensure nothing was amiss. Slate-grey eyes stared back at me from the Virginia Tech Student Identification card in its clear plastic sleeve. "I can't really remember how I got here."

The two men looked at each other soberly. 'Ronald Reagan' continued as though I had said nothing. "I'm Mayor Indigo, and this here is our sheriff, who has so generously allowed you to stay in his home."

"Much obliged," I deadpanned, recognizing too late the sarcasm in my voice.

"It was the least we could do." My host tipped an invisible hat at me but did not smile. "My name is Oliver Greene, it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Son, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you some questions. We don't get too many visitors here, and you surely did arrive under... mysterious circumstances."

"I couldn't agree more." I stuffed the wallet into my hip pocket and leaned on the side of the bed. "But where exactly is 'here'?"

"Argent, Oklahoma," the mayor answered before the Sheriff had a chance to react.

I had to take his word for it, having never bothered to memorize the road map of their illustrious state. Under the distrustful scrutiny of my Bad Cop/Worse Cop welcome team, I recounted the events of the previous day as best I remembered. When I mentioned the boy on the road, the two men suddenly began listening with more interest and absorption than I was entirely comfortable with.

"What did he look like?" the sheriff pressed eagerly.

"I dunno, man, he was only in the lights for a second and I was half-asleep."

"But the car did *hit him*?" Mayor Indigo asked, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"I thought it did, but like I said—"

"*When* the car hit him," he interrupted, wrinkling his brows, "what color was his blood?"

For a moment I stared at the mayor, wondering if I had somehow stumbled into one of those towns that relied on *The National Enquirer* for news and *The X-Files* for educational

programming. "Um, I guess it was red?"

He sighed. "What *kind* of red?" The sheriff fidgeted beside him.

I toyed with the idea that perhaps it was only the mayor who was weird—or just a sicko for the gory details. What did he expect, *hot pink*? "I don't know, but I imagine it was probably *blood* red. Look, it was dark, okay?" I would have been able to tell him the exact shade of red it was—in far greater detail than he would likely hope for—had I gotten a better look before blacking out. I had spent too many hours studying the man-sized color wheel in Professor Oswald's studio.

The mayor looked as though he wanted to prod me further, but the sheriff rested a hand on his shoulder and drew him aside. They moved away from me and breathed conspiratorial whispers at one another while I pretended not to eavesdrop.

"Let it be, Indy. Most like it was just some kids fooling around."

"Fooling around—at night, across the road, by the crick," the mayor punctuated his phrases by counting the pudgy fingers of his right hand. "Them youngsters can't control themselves."

"I know, I know. Look, we'll just give them a speech at school. Leave the bleeder out of it."

Indigo shook his head emphatically. "We have to find out who was there, show the children we mean to enforce the rules. You remember what happened the last time..." He shot a furtive glance at me and dropped his voice below the threshold of my hearing. The sheriff nodded reluctantly and they both turned back to face me simultaneously.

"Mister Flynn," the mayor announced, "we would like to secure your assistance in identifying the young man you sighted last night. We will bring you the yearbook photos—it

won't take long."

My heart made a half-serious attempt to exit through my esophagus, but succeeded only in pumping more blood to my brain, which screamed at me in dull agony.

Sheriff Greene must have noticed the consternation written on my brow. "Please, be at ease. What happened last night was an unfortunate accident—no fault of the elderly gentleman's bless his soul, much less yours. As far as I can reckon, no crime has been committed."

The mayor glanced at the clock. "If we go now, we'll make it back before dinnertime."

The sheriff lifted his hands up in front of him, palms out, as though defending himself from a rabid jackalope. "Whoa there! I don't think we should push the young man so. He needs some time to recuperate, after all."

Indigo lifted his eyebrows and tugged idly at his cuffs. "Later, then. See you at four?"

"Sure thing, Indy." My host ushered the mayor out of the room and closed the door loudly behind them. He did not return afterward, but a minute or so later, I heard him shouting upstairs. The aspirin was finally doing its work, and the relief brought back my curiosity. I rooted around the room but could not find my knapsack.

My jacket, however, waited for me, dry and comfortable once more. I was certain the pockets had been checked: the loose change I had accumulated over my week-long westward sojourn was not distributed in my conventional manner. In the left breast pocket, I found the wrinkled Oklahoma state atlas where I had left it.

Spreading the map out on the bed, I swayed just a little and marveled at how all the little town names swam like the the inhabitants of a flooded ant farm. I blinked until they gave up the struggle and traced my finger along route 271 west from the dendritic sprawl of roads labeled 'Spiro'—no Argent anywhere in sight. I squinted, doubting my eyes and the map, which I had

purchased at the Greyhound station prior to setting off on foot.

Stowing the map once more, I strode over to the door and tried the handle. It turned only a few degrees before catching. I stood there for a moment with the doorknob in my hand, wondering what to do with the revelation that I was locked in the guest room of a town that didn't exist on the map. Finally, I tore my disbelief away from the door and checked the window for iron bars that might lurk behind lacy white curtains. In proud defiance to horror movie conventions, however, the glass and screen stood unobstructed. I pried the window open slowly and climbed out, dropping three feet down to the bald, muddy ground.

The front yard wasn't big, looking more like a lateral extension of the unpaved driveway than anything else. Beyond it lay a road of packed sienna clay that separated the Greene residence from a disturbingly similar house on the other side. Earl's Taurus squatted beside the Sheriff's rusty but once-white Toyota pickup. I scurried over and flung the sedan's door open, groaning without surprise when I saw the ignition empty. Still, I consoled myself with the recovery of my knapsack—which was still on the floor in front of the passenger seat—and the absence of Earl's cadaver.

A flicker of movement caught my eye and I tried to stand up without ducking out of the car, slamming my already tenderized head against the door frame. I recovered quickly and saw Kelly leaning out from behind a dense sagebrush at the corner of the house. With one arm lifted to summon me, her 4-H shirt rode up to reveal her navel. Unsure of what to do, I slunk toward her like an obedient pet.

"I'm sorry, Mal," she whispered so plaintively that I half-expected her to plant a knife in my gut to justify such an apology.

"Why? You haven't done anything. Hell, *I* haven't done anything."

"You're in trouble...because of what happened last night," Kelly lowered her voice so far that I had to move closer to hear her. "Because of my family..."

"Look," I ran my fingers through my coal-black hair, "What happened last night was an accident, and I do not think it will help anyone for me to stay and ID him. For all I know he might have stumbled off into the night and died!"

"Rufus? He isn't dead—but he will be if they find out." Kelly coaxed me farther into the shadow of the house. I wanted to interject some snide remark, but she kept talking. "My father is calling the others to say that you...that you're going give away the secret of our town. When you leave, turn left at the end of the street, then drive straight through town and do *not* stop even if they stand in your way."

"Secret? What secret? That this town has no taste in architecture? Or that the mayor has some kind of perverted fascination with blood? What the hell—"

"They're going to *burn* you," she explained calmly. "Isn't that reason enough?"

I counted to five, smoothing my nerves into something less like madness. A second-story window opened above our heads right at four-and-a-half.

A boy my age poked his head out, soft brown curls hanging down over his eyes in English sheepdog fashion.

"Hunter!" Kelly whispered harshly, waving her hand in the air to get his attention. The boy pressed an index finger to his lips emphatically and tossed Earl's keys down. I snatched them out of the air and dashing for the car. She followed me tentatively, chewing on her lower lip, but stopped at the edge of the driveway.

I turned the key in the ignition, which stoked the engine to life but failed to catch—once, twice, trice. The front door flew open: out came Sheriff Greene. He barreled down the front

steps, his frozen expression more desperate than angry. The old Taurus started on the fourth try, and I wasted no time or finesse backing out into the street, gunning the engine and speeding down the unpaved street like a NASCAR fan on PCP.

Rounding the corner, I sucked in a sharp breath and stood up on the brake pedal. I might have just driven onto someone's lawn to get around the two junky cars parked in the middle of the road except that Mayor Indigo, carrying a fire-engine red gas can, stood beside the blockade with five men and women. The sudden stop scrambled my brains yet again, inspiring a vicious attack of nausea. Earl's coyote paw swung from the rear view mirror like a hanged man. I clenched my jaw and fought back the bile welling up in the back my throat.

The six closed in around the vehicle and I didn't have the time or the energy to lock all of the doors. Instead, I pulled my camping knife from the knapsack and flicked it open just in time to brandish it at the mayor.

Flanked by his comrades, Indigo ignored me with the same haughty indifference that made me hate him from the very start. He grabbed me by the collar and hauled me out of my seat with a strength I did not expect out of his flabby limbs. The smell of the gasoline churned my stomach.

Kelly ran toward us with her father and brother in tow. I thrashed like a trout in the bottom of a fishing boat, but could not break Indigo's grip. My knife flashed in the sunlight, ripped through his red-and-black plaid shirt, and dipped into flesh with a sickening slurp.

"Oh, God..." I choked, dropping the knife as Indigo released me with a quizzical frown on his face. The blade came away coated with a glossy, viscous, bluish-purple fluid—the same that lined the wound in the Mayor's side. Professor Oswald's rainbow mandala spun dizzily in my mind's eye. "Indigo..." I muttered.

He took up the gas can and methodically unscrewed the cap. A sharp keen pierced the haze of chemicals as Indigo produced a silver Zippo. Sheriff Greene roared at his children, but Hunter and Kelly wormed their way through the stern-faced throng to reach me.

“You can't do this,” Hunter shouted. “He ain't one of us!”

Indigo paused and drew back, looking to the Sheriff.

The circle—fair and dark, tall and short—closed in around us, vociferously debating my fate. Hunter knelt in the half-dried mud and supported me with one arm, his eyes shifting nervously and his heart thudding so hard I could feel it against my own ribs. I stretched out my hand and dragged my index and middle fingers along the flat of the blade. They came away wet with...Mayor Indigo's blood? How could he have purple blood? The kid we mowed down the night before, Kelly called him Rufus. Rufus means 'red' in Latin...like his blood.

No. It wasn't blood at all.

"Paint," I whimpered, then raised my voice so abruptly that it cracked. "It's *paint!*"

"Congratulations—still feigning surprise, are we?" the mayor glowered at us. "Kelly, I suggest you and your brother step aside, leave this matter to those who understand it."

I tilted my head back and sized up my assailants through half-lidded eyes while the sun slow-roasted my brain. Paint people? Without a generous supply of turpentine, surely I stood no chance against them. What else in the world would a village of pigments be afraid of? Fading? Clashing? Professor Oswald's faintly German-tinted voice spun out from his mandala: *if you slowly mix a color into its complement, the product will gradually lose its vibrancy, its identity as a color... the two parent-hues neutralize each other and generate a variety of grey, the unavoidable entropy at the heart of the great Wheel.*

Levering my weight against Hunter's shoulder, I stumbled to my feet and waved my

Indigo-stained hand at Sheriff Greene. "You! You want me dead so they won't find out that your daughter is dating a complementary color!"

"Mal!" Kelly gasped, shrinking away from me. "You don't know what you're saying." Hunter let go of me and slunk away into the crowd.

Sheriff Greene whipped out a revolver—I have no idea where he was keeping it. His hand trembled as he leveled the weapon at me, clearly unfamiliar with it. "Are you gonna to take that kind of profanity from the blood bag?" The others turned to him coldly.

The Sheriff only cocked the hammer back and took aim. Beside me, Indigo turned an unearthly shade of blue-purple and dissolved out of his clothes into a wave of cohesive paint. It crashed toward Greene and crested, re-solidifying to form a naked mayor in time to snatch the gun away before it fired—all inside the space of a second.

"I've suspected this for some time, though I never could figure out which one of Mrs. Madder's boys she was with." Indigo advanced on him, tossing the firearm aside. "I never imagined you'd cover up for her—you of all people. You ought to be punished along with her."

"It weren't her!" Greene spat. "It was Hunter."

Kelly pressed her slender hands to her lips, verdant tears marring her cheeks like cheap Halloween makeup. I started to tell her 'I'm sorry', but there was no point—and no time. I dropped into the driver's seat, circumvented the amateur roadblock, and floored the gas pedal down the straightaway without looking back.

No one bothered to get in my way, and as I neared the edge of the town I relaxed my right ankle. Someone *ought* to have stopped me, but I recognized no pursuit save by an ineffable sense of *déjà vu*. There has been a lot of running away in my life lately.

The dirt road, growing more indistinct by the second, led me at last to route 271, where

Rufus's poor timing nearly got both of us killed. I paused at the T-juncture for seven clicks of the turn signal—give or take, since I kept flipping it from left to right and back again.

Eastward lay a summer in Jesus camp, three more years at Virginia Tech, and maybe some kind of career; westward lay an uncertain future to plan from Arthur's couch, and probably a minimum wage budget to split between art supplies and brown rice. I wiped Indigo off of my hand, adding another colorful stain to my shirt, and batted at Earl's coyote paw. High-five! The periphery of my right eye caught a splash of dark green on the floor in front of the passenger seat, not quite obscured from view by my knapsack and the seat cushion.

"Hunter?" I asked, not quite incredulous. The pool of color swirled and surged up into the seat beside me, taking on the young man's smooth features with uncanny rapidity. My eyes lingered without my permission on his perfect body.

"They might have burned me if I'd stayed," he said, evidently not troubled by his nudity. "You owe me at least a ride for exiling me to save yourself."

"Fair is fair," I muttered. "And with us gone I suppose no one can implicate Rufus."

He nodded once. "Doesn't matter even if they do find out. No risk of an ongoing scandal, with me gone."

I looked him over, marveling at the smooth expanse of flawless skin that inexplicably hid his true colors. Tearing my eyes away, I turned very deliberately back to the road. "Do me a favor: get some clothes out of that bag and put them on so we don't get pulled over."

Hunter shrugged, but obliged.

"So, how do you feel about San Francisco?" I asked, darting a sidelong glance at him.

The Hokie sweater looked good on him. He had found my roll of paintbrushes, and was caressing one of the pigment-stained brush heads with the tips of his fingers. "I'll go where you

go,” he said, meeting my gaze. His green eyes struck me as vaguely ironic somehow.

I flipped the turn signal off and pulled out onto the highway, racing the sun for the dusky horizon.