Seeded deep in the heart of the Nevada desert, the bleeding white sun spills its burning scarlet entrails over pale dust spread across the cracking asphalt. We bumble and scudd along Route 50, the main artery of the state’s dusty landscape, while a handful of fans fight, helplessly, against the sweltering poison that penetrates the skin of the RV. Small clouds scrape the desert’s pallid panorama in slow motion, and the sky overhead is an inexhaustible wasteland of pale azure. On both sides of the sombre river are thick, twisting brambles of dead bushes and ivory monoliths of roadkill. The RV’s centerpiece is a dancing, yellow Jamaican banana hanging over the rearview. It’s just a silly, little novelty item lifted from a gas station back in Tucson. Lily’ snatched it from the counter display after paying for cigarettes and gas.

Strange though, even as her brown hair gives way to elegant heather silk, she still has the hands of a snake. Yet, it makes sense. Despite her subdued presence, she is (we are) infatuated with the idea - the act - of being bad. I never understood it. I never wanted to be bad. I never wanted to be some criminal, some guy on the run with his sister in an RV that smells like urine and Febreeze; that’s not any boy’s dream. I sigh. So it seems that we have become the people our parents warned us about.

Out of the rolling expanse of dust appears a beaten Texaco station, relief moves over me in a passing breath of the fan. A chainlink fence grates the backdrop of the scene, and as I look further, a town is stretched out around the highway. Seconds later, I pull into the gravel lot.

“Why are we stopping?” Lily asks, her voice subdued and long since cauterized from the endless packs of Marlboros.

“What do you want?”

She sits up in her seat, pulls her legs off the dashboard, and glares at me sorely. I stare at a bleached poster of a Vegas magic show.
“Why are we stopping?”

“Do you want something or not?” I snap, still not turning to her.

She doesn't answer for a long time, then the fragile glass of her weak resistance is shattered by a loud storm.

“Don’t you dare! We don’t need it, we don-”

I shoot up from the seat and start for the door. She howls. I bellow.

“Yeah? Well we didn’t need that banana either!”

Slam--

And I’m out in the torrid furnace, yet it’s still cooler than the RV. As I look around the gas station parking lot, I only see a silver Honda Accord parked in the furthest space. Debilitated sun blockers defend its windows.

Outside, no shade can flee from the advancement of the day’s heat, but the station is cool and the light breeze of the A/C brushes over me as I enter. I dry the sweat on my brow with the back of my hand. At the register, a big girl, probably no more than eighteen, smacks Juicy Fruit as she reads an article in People Magazine, the cover rolled back, hiding the face of Angelina Jolie. Neither of us pretend to play the part of customer and cashier by exchanging smiles. A cough conjures it’s way out of my throat, but still no response from her.

My rusty voice oxidizes the air.

“There a bathroom that I can use in here?”

For a moment she only chews her gum, prepared to say no, then she looks me up and down. I know what’s going through her head: He is a forty-something year old man, probably with some
condition; if he doesn't go now, it could mean trouble later.

“Next to the drinks.”

Merciful gods these young folks are, but I still don’t pay her any thanks. I lock the door of the bathroom. The space is small and gray. Scarlet-brown toilet paper clings to the seat of the throne, the baby changing station is broken, the stall door is absent. The mirror is split by a cavernous crack, inked with obscene inscriptions. The rusted faucet above the parched porcelain sink lets go of a drop, and it’s devoured by the small, dark drain at the bottom. I brush my face and wipe the small beads of fresh sweat onto my pants. My hands smoothly maneuver their way to the back of my waist.

It’s still there, as it always is. She’s a beautiful girl, my M19. Chipped and a little beaten from her years of service, yet still as faithful as the Geyser. She is warm in my hands, and I stare at her for a long time before looking at my face in the mirror. Behind the gold rimmed glasses - pulled from a dead man’s face - I see a living man, dying. My forehead is shattered by hard folds. Wrinkles spread their wings from the corners of my eyes, and deep rivulets drag themselves through the depressed peninsulas of my cheeks. A tickle begins to feather in my throat, and I press my fist against my lips as I begin to cough. Panic tingles through me for a moment. I’m afraid I’ll find blood, but as I pull away, only spittle surfaces.

I look back at myself in the mirror, and I see my father, laugh lines curl around his mouth and his dead-greeting eyes welcome me. A bang comes from the door.

“Hurry up! I’ve got to take a piss, guy!”

I swallow and stuff the gun in the space between my waist and my belt and throw my shirt over it as I unlock the door. I brush past the boy, and he gives me an appalled look. I do my best to mimic it.

To tell you the truth, I never wanted to be like I am. My real dream as a boy was to be an
accountant. I loved working at high frequencies, making sense of the big numbers. Whenever I worked my wizardry, an erratic fever infected my heart and mind, and the numbers would click together in a ebullient frenzy. This is the infatuation. This is the obsession. Endless numbers.

The gun’s been out for a long time, and I don’t notice it until I’m at the register. The girl hasn’t looked up from her People Magazine since I walked into the restroom, and how long ago was that? How long has it been exactly since the moment that I passed through the doors of my troubled life? I don’t know, an immeasurable amount of time likely. I like those long stretches of time that seem to run on and on and on forever, longer even. That’s what I enjoy. The infinite stretches.

I slam the Lays onto the counter, and the girl looks up suddenly. She staggers backwards into the cigarettes which fall around her in a red and white rain.

I pull the trigger once and a ballet of cigarettes dance off the shelves. She begins to holler out, but the rust in my voice snaps into iron as I bellow at her.

“Shut up right now, or I’ll unload another one!”

She immediately shuts her pink lips and straddles the cigarette shelves.

“Now it seems that I’ve forgotten my wallet in the car, so . . .” I hold out my hand. “The money, hand it over. As always, this will be over quickly if you don’t panic anymore than you already have.”

I step closer to the counter, lean over, and press the barrel against her face.

“Did you hear me, Bessie? The cash!”

She lets out a terrified shriek and cups her hands over her mouth as tears irrigate the counter.

“Please don’t hurt me,” she replies softly, and suddenly I’m staring at my mother from below, forty years ago, under her desk at the bank.

“Just get it!” The robber shouts from over the counter.
My mother’s face is a cardinal rose of chasted panic, but she gathers her strength and strikes him with her heel, snatching up a ballpoint in the same instance. The tip enters his eye like a javelin, and his gun goes off as he claps his hands over his eye. My mother reels back. A stream of crimson turns her wedding diamond red.

With bloodshot eyes straining at me, he screams, “Get back under the desk!”

I blink. A cloud passes over the sun, and in the corner of my eye I see a coyote dash across the desert behind a veil of chain link that surrounds the reservation across the parched road from the station. Suddenly, reeling pain drives me to the ground, and as the cloud that covers the sun comes to pass, the figure of the boy from the bathroom eclipses it. The stark white corona blazing around him as he brings his fist to my nose. Hot blood spills from the impact. I throw him off of me, and as I fall over him, I hear weeping.

From the bathroom, my mother cries over the sink, steam billowing up in front of her, and she looks at me.

“What’s wrong mom?”

We had just turned thirteen, my sister and I.

“There’s not enough, Joey,” she said softly. “There’s not enough.”

She looked at me in the mirror.

Our father had been diagnosed with cancer earlier that year. The doctor called and our father answered. Silence overcame my sister’s birthday party as my mother collapsed into the loveseat; everyone but my sister and I made their exit. No condolences, only silence.

In the weeks following (as it spread to his lungs), in the shadow of a hundred insomniac nights, I remember whispers.
“We’re still twelve short.”

Skin pressed against skin as our father struck his hands to his face again.

After my father died, my mother would mumble loose, incoherent phrases about money and time, but sorry to tell you mom: they’re just numbers. And the numbers never seemed to work in our favor.

The boy’s face is a mauve storm where I punched him; *Lily* shines her .45m caliber light down on him. The girl is crying, and suddenly the sound of screaming tires on gravel joins the chorus of sirens, but *pop*! The voices are executed by spikes.

As I look over my shoulder from the harrowing halo of crimson growing around the boys head, I see the long black shadows of the greenbacks strewn across the floor. Outside, the RV has crashed into the fence, plumes of darkness whirling around it. Arms of smoke reach for the bodies of cops as they emerge from the dusty inferno, guns drawn as they advance toward the station.

I turn back to the boy, and blink as he stares up at me. I drop the gun and fall onto his chest. His heartbeat is nonexistent. My glasses have fallen off, reflecting two ovular rays of light across the floor. A cop barrels through the door.

“You have three seconds to turn around with your hands up before we shoot.”

The last day that I spent with him, we were on the patio, and he taught me how to play Solitaire.

“Two seconds, sir!”

I never liked it all that much.

“One second, sir!”

He warned me never to become a gambler, never become the red beggar hungry for the bread of money, especially the kind that always adds up to nothing.
BANG.

No amount can cut our losses, not even a few dollars more.