

FICTION | NOVEMBER 23, 2009 ISSUE

INDIANAPOLIS (HIGHWAY 74)

BY SAM SHEPARD

PHOTOGRAPH BY DENIS DARZACQ / AGENCE VU / AURORA

I've been crisscrossing the country again, without much reason. Sometimes a place will just pop into my head and I'll take off. This time, down through Normal, Illinois, from high up in white Minnesota, dead of winter, icy roads, wind blowing sideways across the empty cornfields. Find myself stopping for the night outside Indianapolis, off 74, just before it makes its sweeping junction with 65 South to Louisville. I randomly pick a Holiday Inn, more for its familiar green logo and predictability than anything else. Plus, I'm wiped out. Evidently there's some kind of hot-rod convention going on in town, although I seem to remember those always taking place at the height of summer, when people can run around in convertible coupés with the tops down. Anyway, there are no rooms available, except possibly one, and that one is "Smoking," which I have nothing against. The desk clerk tells me she'll know in about ten minutes if there's going to be a cancellation. I'm welcome to wait, so I do, not wanting to face another ninety-some miles down to Kentucky through threatening weather.

I collapse into one of the overstuffed sofas in the lobby, facing two plasma-screen TVs in opposite corners, both tuned to the same "reality" channel, showing surveillance footage of convenience-store robberies: teen-agers in hooded sweatshirts, holding up their baggy jeans with one hand while the other pumps 9-mm. slugs into screaming victims, who claim they have no access to the safe. I ask the desk clerk if she can please turn the TVs off, or change the channel, but she says that she has no control over it. The



TVs are on some kind of preordained computer system, much like sprinklers in Los Angeles or garage security lights everywhere else. I ask her if she can at least mute the sound, so that I don't have to listen to the agonized groans of the victims or the raging insanity of the gunmen, but she says that she has no control over that, either. I pick up a travel magazine featuring Caribbean vacations from the glass table and leaf through it, pausing at every picture of a bikini-clad woman lounging beachside holding a tall icy cocktail and staring smugly at the camera. The screams and groans and gunfire from the TVs keep repeating in looped cycles and soon lose all sense of being connected to murder. I find myself anticipating the next scream the way you would a familiar lyric in a pop song. (Here comes the high, shrieking temper-tantrum sequence just after he pops off a rapid spray of shots.) I'm not sure how long I hang there in limbo in the lobby, but it feels like far more than ten minutes.

A tall, skinny woman in a cloth Pat Nixon-type coat and a blue bandanna comes through the revolving doors, pulling a small suitcase on wheels. She smiles at me as she passes, and I feel immediately sad for no reason that I can put my finger on. She pauses at the desk to get her key, then continues toward the elevators, giving me a quick glance over her shoulder as she disappears down the hallway. Again, I feel this little stab of melancholy, or emptiness—maybe that's it. I stand and stretch, then walk over to the desk and ask the girl if she knows anything more about the cancellation. Not yet, she says, but reassures me that the possible guests will be calling any second now. They're coming in from Tupelo, Mississippi, with a trailerload of hot rods, and everything depends on the weather, she says. I return to the squashy sofa and collapse again. (Isn't Tupelo where Elvis was born?) I notice the yellow spine of a *National Geographic* at the bottom of a stack on the glass table and dig it out. The feature story is titled "The Black Pharaohs—Conquerors of Ancient Egypt." A man who looks very much like the young James Earl Jones is on the cover, his muscular arms crossed over his chest, with a leopard-skin cape, thick gold necklaces, and a gold-leaf skullcap with two shining cobras on the crown, staring stoically out. I am flipping through the glossy pages when I feel a tall presence beside me and hear a high-pitched female voice saying my name with a question mark behind it: "Stuart?" I turn to see the same skinny woman in her cloth coat but without the suitcase.

"You don't remember me, do you?" she asks. I stare into her green eyes, searching for something to recognize, but the same tinge of melancholy is all I get. "Nineteen-sixty-five," she says with a little sigh. "Tenth Street and Second Avenue? St. Mark's Church."

"I'm drawing a blank," I confess. "I've been driving for days. What seems like days, anyway."

She laughs nervously, half-embarrassed, then stares at the carpet. “We lived together for a while. Don’t you remember? We’d get up every morning and sit on the edge of my mattress eating bowls of wheat germ with brown honey all over it.”

“Oh,” I say, and keep staring into her eyes with mounting desperation, wondering if maybe I’ve snapped some fragile synapse in my brain from too much driving; the final breakdown of road madness, right here in Indianapolis. Then she does an amazing thing. She whips off the blue bandanna and shakes out a mane of red hair that topples almost to her waist. Now it all comes back. “Oh—it’s you,” I say, still unable to attach a name.

“Who?” She giggles. “You don’t remember me at all, do you?”

“Of course I do.”

“You’re just saying that.”

“No—”

“Then what’s my name? Come on, it wasn’t that long ago.”

“Nineteen-sixty-five,” I say.

“Or six—”

“No, it couldn’t have been.”

“Maybe ’68. That was it.”

“That’s still forty years ago!”

“No!” She laughs.

“Add it up.”

“Yeah, I guess it was, wasn’t it?”

“Beth, right?” I blurt out.

“No. See? You don’t remember.”

“Betty?”

“Close.”

“What, then? This is wearing me out.”

“Becky!” she announces with a beaming smile and her arms wide open, as if I were about to jump up and embrace her.

“Sure—Becky. That’s right. Becky. Of course.”

“What’s my last name?”

“Oh, please—I can’t keep up with this. I’m really wiped out—”

“Thane,” she says.

“Thane?”

“Thane. Becky Marie Thane.”

“Right,” I say.

“You really don’t have any recollection at all, do you?” she says in almost a whisper, then stifles a little chuckle. She crosses her long arms and holds her shoulders softly, as though filling the blank of affection she wishes were coming from me. “I was so in love with you, Stuart,” she says, sighing, and her eyes drift down to the pink wall-to-wall carpeting with pizza stains and Pepsi splashes. The violent sounds of the surveillance loop keep mercilessly repeating. I notice the girl behind the desk giving us a sideways glance,

then returning to the bright-green glow of her computer screen. There is no escape. Becky Marie Thane lets her long arms fall to her sides in surrender, the blue bandanna dangling from her right hand. I return the *National Geographic* to the glass table and then I do suddenly get a picture of that time, a fleeting memory of a morning facing a New York window with a bowl clenched between my naked knees, and I say, just to be saying something, “Your hair is even redder than I remember,” which makes her burst out laughing, happy that I haven’t abandoned the game.

“It’s not real,” she says.

“What?” I say, thinking she’s referring to something metaphysical.

“The color. Clairol. Out of a bottle.”

“Oh—well, it looks great.”

“Thanks.”

“Very . . . festive.”

“Festive?” She giggles and fluffs the back of her head like a movie star. Then she gets embarrassed again and twists herself from side to side.

“So, how old were we then?” I stumble on without really wanting to.

“We were kids,” she says. “We were barely in our twenties.”

“Were we?”

“I was, anyway. I know that much.”

“Kids—yeah, I guess.”

“How many do you have?” she asks. Her green eyes meet mine, and the little twinge of sadness I was feeling turns into an undertow.

“You mean children?” She nods and her eyes stay hooked to me.

“I’ve got a whole bunch,” I say.

“How many?” she insists.

“Five. But not all with the same woman.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” She smiles.

“How about you?” I ask.

“Two. I have two girls.”

“Two. That’s great. Where are they?” I say.

“Here. Well, I mean—”

“That’s right. You’re from Indianapolis, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am. You remember that!” She smiles.

“I remember your dad calling, back then. When we were sitting on the bed eating that stuff.”

“Wheat germ.”

“Right. He called to tell you there was a riot going on in your front yard. So it *must* have been ’68, wasn’t it? That was when there was a riot every other day.”

“Must’ve been.”

“Martin Luther King and—”

“Right.”

“Everything exploding. Detroit. L.A.”

“The whole world on fire.”

“Seemed like.”

“Well.” She pauses, fishing for something more. “I didn’t mean to—I mean, I was so shocked when I walked through the door and saw you sitting here. I couldn’t believe it. I knew it was you as soon as I saw you, but . . . I thought, I can’t just walk on by and not say anything. You know—just go on up to my room and pretend it wasn’t you. I had to come back down and say something. I mean—all this time.”

“No, I’m glad you did. It’s great to see you.”

“What in the world are you doing here? In Indianapolis.”

“Just passing through.”

“Oh.”

“How about you? I mean, if you live here how come you’re in a Holiday Inn?”

Everything stops. She goes suddenly numb and her lips start to tremble. For some reason, the background seems to have gone silent. The girl at the desk stares at us now, as though she suspects that something illegal is going on.

“My husband—” Becky says, and halts on the words. “My husband disappeared a month and a half ago. He—just took off.”

“Oh, no,” I say.

“He took the girls.”

“No—”

“He may have left the country.” I find myself standing and making a feeble gesture toward comforting her, but I’d rather be running out the door.

“Have you—I mean, do you have help?” My mouth has gone dry. “Police? Lawyers?”

“Yes, I’ve gone through all that.”

“That’s a pretty serious—I mean, that’s considered kidnapping, isn’t it?”

“It *is* kidnapping.”

“Have you got any clues? I mean—”

“We’ve followed some credit-card debits—you know, gas stations, restaurants—but they all led to dead ends. Everything winds up in Florida and just stops.”

“Florida?”

“He has some family down there.”

“What about the girls? How old are they?”

“Fifteen and seventeen. There’s still some investigation going on at the house, so that’s why I can’t stay there.”

“Oh.”

“I just took a room here for the time being. I’m kind of in limbo, I guess.” She casts an arm out limply, and the blue bandanna flutters up like a distant flag of truce. Her eyes scan the two plasma screens as the screaming and the gunfire start up again. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t mean to lay all this on you. I just saw you sitting here when I came in and thought—”

“No, that’s O.K. I’m glad you—it’s just great to see you again.”

She laughs, then breaks down, but quickly recovers herself and turns her shoulder to me. I move to console her, but she turns her back completely and crosses her arms again. The desk clerk is heading straight for me across the lobby, with her laminated nametag pinned to her chest and an apologetic face. “I’m sorry, sir,” she says, “but they’ve just confirmed that room I was telling you about. That ‘Smoking’ room with two beds.”

“Oh,” I say.

“Yeah, they just phoned in to confirm it. They’re on their way. I’m sorry about that.”

“That’s O.K.”

*“O.K., her mouth is full—
run over and ask her if
everything is O.K.”*



“There’s a Motel 6 just off 465. They usually might have a vacancy. If you want, I can call down there, see if they’ve got something.”

“Would you mind doing that? I’d appreciate it very much.”

“No problem. I’ll let you know.” She heads back to her post. Becky seems to have pulled herself together now. Her arms drop, and she starts brushing off the front of her coat as though she’d just discovered lint. She turns to me with a smile and rubs her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Well, I’m so glad I ran into you, Stuart. You look the same as always.” She steps toward me with her hand extended, which I find slightly ineffectual, under the circumstances, but I go along with it. Her hand feels icy and slim, and she slides it back out of my grip almost immediately. Then she gives me a little peck on the cheek, like a sister might. It all comes back to me now, the smell of her soft breath. “Bye,” she says abruptly, and walks away, disappearing down the hallway again.

If I had a gun right now, I’d shoot both the plasma TV screens and maybe the overstuffed sofa, and then maybe I’d start in on the glass coffee table and the Caribbean-vacation brochure and all the *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines with men of the year on their covers. Instead, I wander back over to the desk, where

the girl with the laminated name is being surprisingly helpful. I get close enough to read the tag as she squishes the phone between her chin and her collarbone while scratching down a note. “Lashandra,” the tag says, and it has a little yellow happy face to go with it. “Lashandra,” I say to her, not knowing exactly which syllable to emphasize. She squints at me and holds a blue-lacquered fingernail to her lips, as though she were about to land a luxury suite down at the Motel 6. I signal to her that I no longer want the room by drawing my index finger across my throat, then head for the revolving doors. Lashandra calls out to me in dismay, “Sir! Excuse me, sir!” I turn back to her. “Don’t you want the room? I think I might have found you something.”

“No, thanks, but I do appreciate your efforts. You’re very kind.”

“Oh, no problem at all, sir. Sorry it didn’t work out.”

“Lashandra, could I ask you a quick question?”

“Sure, sir. Anything at all.”

“Don’t you ever go crazy listening to that TV all night long? That—murder?”

“Oh, I don’t even hear it anymore. You know—it’s just always on.” She smiles, and I pass through the revolving doors. The pistol shots fade behind the glass.

Outside, it’s dark, snowflakes floating through orange light. I completely forgot that I left the car running, and my yellow dog is clawing frantically at the windows, seeing me approach. I let her out the back. She slides across a patch of ice as she hits the asphalt. Her tail is wagging wildly in circles, as though she’d picked up the scent of quail. She dashes off toward a little square of brown grass to take a leak. The temperature feels like it’s dropped down into the low twenties now, and the flying snow makes my eyes tear up. The dog must be taking the longest piss on earth. She just squats there with one hind leg weirdly raised, staring straight at me, as though I might run off without her. Steam rises behind her. The hollow moan of the highway makes me wonder if I’ve finally broken all connections, without even really wanting to.

I pop my dog back in the car and slide into the driver's seat, which is now red hot, since I also left the seat warmer on. I'm about to drop the gearshift down into drive when I look up through the snow and there she is—Becky Marie Thane—standing directly between the headlights, staring at me with a look not unlike my dog's. She's standing there shivering, without her coat, and the snow catches hold of her red hair and it glows in the backlight, like a halo. Am I now having a religious experience?

She comes running up to the window as I roll it down, amazed. "I'm sorry," she says. "I just thought maybe you'd want to stay in my room since you can't—I mean, I have a couch and everything. A separate couch. It's a foldout, you know—in an alcove with a sink. Not a whole room, exactly, but I just thought it would save you a trip in this weather. I'm not trying to—you know—"

"Oh, thanks, Becky," I say, cutting her off. "I really appreciate it, but I ought to be getting on down the road."

"All right, that's fine. That's fine." She smiles. "I just thought I'd offer. I wasn't trying to—"

"No, thanks so much, though. It was really great to see you again."

"Bye," she says sweetly, and gives me a little fluttering wave, then blows me a kiss as I drive off. I watch in the rearview mirror as she darts back into the lobby, stomping the snow off her shoes at the entrance. I'm trying to think of what old movie this reminds me of. One of those corny black-and-white forties Air Force films with tearful goodbyes as Jimmy Stewart flies off into the wild blue yonder. Why is everything I'm conjuring up in black-and-white?

The snow is really assaulting the windshield as I head for the Louisville junction, the dog turning tight circles in the back, then dropping down into a ball and tucking her nose into her tail, resigning herself to yet another hundred miles of bleak highway. I start drifting off into the past as the world gets dimmer and whiter. Maybe there's a correlation between external blindness and internal picturing. I can see the edge of the mattress now, and our gray bowls side by side, our knees touching. These are some of the other things that go sailing through my head as I strain to keep the car between the lines: Leaving the desert on a clear day. Boarding the Greyhound. Getting off in Times Square. Huge poster of a pop group from England with Three Stooges haircuts. Blood bank with a sign in the window offering five dollars a pint. Black whores with red hair. Chet Baker standing in a doorway on Avenue C. Tompkins Square

Park, with its giant dripping American elms. Cabbage-and-barley soup. Hearing Polish for the first time. Old World women in bandannas and overcoats. Cubans playing chess. Rumors of acid and TCP. Crowds gathered around a black limo, listening to a radio report of Kennedy's killing. Jungles burning with napalm. Caskets covered in American flags. Mules hauling Martin Luther King, Jr.,'s coffin. Stanley Turrentine carrying his axe in a paper sack.

I'm turning around. I'm in the middle of a blizzard and I'm turning around. I come up on a giant tractor-trailer rig, jackknifed in the ditch. No sign of a driver. I'm up over the median now, with the hazard lights flashing, hoping that nothing is roaring down on top of me from the opposite lanes. I'm driving blind. I'd get over to the shoulder, but I can't tell where it is. Something is happening to my eyesight in the constant oncoming flow and swirl of snow. I feel as if I'm suddenly falling through space and the wheels have somehow lost all contact with the earth. I really am coming completely apart now, shaking, terrible shivers, gripping the wheel as if any second I could just go plunging off into the abyss and never be found.

Somehow I instinctively poke my way back through the gray to the looping exit, and limp into the Holiday Inn parking lot. The family from Tupelo are unloading their huge crew-cab diesel in the whirling storm, sliding their coolers and luggage across the icy blacktop. I just sit there for a while, watching them through the wipers, my hazard lights still flashing, and my dog getting very nervous about what may lie ahead. Maybe I'll just spend the night in the car, I think. Wait it out. That would mean leaving the engine running so that I wouldn't freeze to death. That would mean that the dog would be whining and turning in circles. I snap on my satellite radio for some possible clue. The angelic voice of Sam Cooke. I can't take it. I turn it off, not wanting to provoke a total emotional breakdown. Can I just sit here all night like this? Engine running. Dog spinning. Lights blinking. Snow falling. What will happen when the sun finally comes out and the snow stops and the ice melts and the whole landscape is transformed into spring and stuff is blooming and farmers are running their gigantic combines up and down the long rows? What will happen then? Will I still be sitting here like this with the car running? What will happen when they discover that someone is trying to live in his car in the Holiday Inn parking lot? I've got to get this car parked!

So I do, and then one thing leads to another and I'm heading back into the lobby, not really looking forward to encountering Lashandra again, not really looking forward to waiting in line behind the Tupelo hot-rod family, but there I am. Thank God the TV channel has changed. Now it's news with some distinguished-looking dude in a suit, parading back and forth in front of a huge electronic map of the

United States, magically touching it and brushing it in different areas, causing it to light up red in the South, blue in the North, giving the impression that the whole damn country is a cartoon show, divided up like apple pie, and no one actually lives here, trying to score a simple room at the Holiday Inn in the middle of a blizzard, somewhere on the outskirts of Indianapolis.

The Tupelo family finally trundle off with all their gear toward the “Smoking” room I once coveted. Lashandra’s face is unsure what expression to make when she sees me pathetically standing there again. It’s a cross between smiling politeness and sheer terror at what she must see in my eyes. “Lashandra, hi,” I say meekly. She says nothing. “I was wondering if you could do me a favor. I—the storm is really bad out there. You wouldn’t believe it.”

“That’s what they were saying,” she says. “Those folks from Tupelo.”

“It’s unbelievable. Whiteout. I could barely see the hood in front of me.”

“They’ve got it on the news,” she says. “All the way down into New Orleans, I guess.”

“Really? Well—I couldn’t—I had to turn back around.”

“I still haven’t got any vacancy, though,” she says.

“No, I know. I know that. But what I was wondering is—I have an old friend here. That woman—you know, that woman I was talking to before? That tall skinny woman with the red hair?”

“Right,” she says.

“I was wondering if you could give me her room number, because she offered to let me stay in her room and—”

“We’re not allowed to give out the names of guests, sir.”

“No, I know. I mean—I know her name. Her name is Becky Marie Thane and we used to live together in New York City. Way back, I mean.”

“Well, I still can’t just give out the room number, sir. That’s our policy.”

“I understand that, but do you think I could call her, then, on the house phone? Would that be all right?”

“Sure. I can let you do that. Let me get you connected.” She slides the house phone toward her, looks up Becky’s room number, punches it in, then hands me the receiver. I’m holding it to my ear, hoping that Lashandra will stop staring at me and turn her back discreetly, but she stays right there, eyes boring into mine. Becky picks up.

“Hello,” she says, and the simple innocence of her voice starts me weeping and I can’t stop, and Lashandra finally turns away. ♦

SAM SHEPARD
