

RATTLESNAKE

The country and western on the car radio had started out as something that marshmallowed Miranda's mind, calming her down. It went with the flat uneventful desert landscape that slipped by outside the windows. Then somehow it had started to become irritating, without her really noticing, until finally, as *Stand By Your Man* started up, she punched the off button like she was poking out the singer's eye. In the sudden absence of music she heard the phlegm-throated burr of the engine and the long kiss of the tyres on tarmac. The road stretched ahead in an impossibly straight line to a horizon that someone had made with the same ruler. The sun sat symmetrically on the end of the road, like a big swollen half orange. Maybe this desert highway followed some old migrant trail to California, and the settlers had guided themselves westwards by the sun. Anyway, it was lousy for the eyes. To save them, Miranda concentrated on the desert off to one side, where the cacti slipped by like phantoms. The thought came to her that they could be the spirits of migrants who had failed to make it across this desert. They'd have rattled out their last breath in the dessicated air, pleading for God to send them water. Then a cactus had grown for each corpse, thrusting up through a huddle of bones picked clean by squabbling vultures. "Give us a ride," the cacti would have said, if they'd had voices, "Give us a ride if you're going to California!"

How long was it since she had seen another car? This road was endless. She pressed her foot down a little harder, sending the needle well past the statutory fifty five. Then she saw it. Shit! The gas tank needle was flat on empty, and the warning light was on.

She forced her mind backwards over the last hour. How long ago had she driven through that place - Wackenburg, Wickenbird, whatever? There'd been gas stations there for sure, although she couldn't bring them into focus. They'd slipped by, as irrelevant as the cacti, the other cars, the big signs for motels. If only she'd paid attention. Now what?

Miranda slowed the big Dodge right down so she could think. She checked the rear view mirror, and her attention was held by the eyes that looked back at her. They were like voids. The low sun straight ahead threw the minute landscape of her face into sharp relief. For a change she looked every minute of her forty-three years. The car wandered into the middle of the highway, and she shifted her gaze quickly from those stranger's eyes to steer it back to the right.

It must be too far now to go back to Wackenburg. There had to be another gas station ahead somewhere, and besides, the idea of turning back gave her a horrible sensation. She had to keep going now, like some space probe, sent out into the depths of the cosmos. She didn't know what she'd find there, but, please God, just let there be a gas station. He could surely just do her one favour - he owed it.

As each mile clicked onto the clock like a gasp for fuel Miranda found she had to fight off a tension which made her grip the steering wheel with knuckles like blanched bones. She tried to breathe deeply, using the old tension-ridding exercises they'd taught her in drama school. She stretched her cramped muscles, tightening then relaxing them, bunching up and releasing. But the tension crept back, until she felt she would scream. Fighting the urge to go as fast as possible, she let her speed drop to around forty, to eke out the gas. She felt as if she was wading on foot through deep sand and sagebrush, getting nowhere. It was a slow-motion sequence, a nightmare.

Then, against the setting sun, a miracle. A dark blob of buildings, and a sign. A lit up sign. A lit up sign that said "Mr Happy's Gas Station". Miranda swung the Dodge off the tarmac in a graceful lazy curve and onto the dusty forecourt. God had turned up trumps after all.

There were two pumps, and a little kiosk with a light on but no-one inside. There was a house behind the kiosk. Kind of an apologetic looking house, wooden, with flaking white paint. Off to one side were a couple of sheds that looked like they couldn't be bothered falling down completely. Behind them, there was the desert again.

Miranda waited a few seconds, then hit the horn once, briefly. Nothing happened. Maybe it was self-serve. She turned off the engine, and opened the door. The heat was starting to diminish now that the sun was low. The sky was faceless blue, deepening to black already out in the east, where she'd come from. Miranda stood stretching for a moment, and smoothed out the crumples in her white linen skirt and jacket. Where was Mr Happy? She called out, in the direction of the house.

"Is there anybody there? Hello? Is there anybody around?"

There was no reply, but an old metal sign for some kind of engine oil creaked slightly in the merest hint of an evening breeze. Oh well, must be self-serve anyway. She unlocked the fuel cap and reached for the holster of the nearest pump. But it was padlocked. The light on the pump was on, but the pistol grip of the hose was padlocked to the holster. She checked out the other pump. Same story.

Miranda reached into the car and pulled her handbag off the passenger seat. She found her cigarettes and lighter. Agitation was making her fingers clumsy. Where the fuck was the attendant, and why the fuck were the pumps padlocked? She needed nicotine like those migrants needed water, and the first lungful of smoke sluiced relief through her. The thin backwash of the smoke streamed out of her nose, but before she could pull again a voice came from the house. It was disembodied, as if the house itself were speaking.

"Excuse me, you can't smoke there!"

It was a young man's voice. Now at last maybe she'd get somewhere. She pulled more calmness and strength out of the cigarette, then dropped it into the dust and ground it out with her heel.

"I'm sorry!" she called out towards the house. "Could I have some gas please?"

The screen door of the house opened slowly, and the owner of the voice emerged onto the little porch. The low sun picked him out like a warm golden spotlight. He was of medium height, slightly built, maybe nineteen or twenty years old. He had on jeans and a checked shirt, and a baseball cap with a name on it in big red letters. *Harold*, the hat said.

Harold stood for a moment on the porch. Miranda saw an Edward Hopper painting, the solitary figure transfixed in a momentary beauty by the sun's late glow. Then the boy came down the three wooden steps. There he stopped again.

"Station's closed ma'am." It was said neutrally, just a statement.

Miranda held the last of the smoke in her lungs a moment longer, then let it out slowly.

"But your sign's all lit up."

"Sure - I was just going to turn it off. We shut at six, and now it's five after six." Harold's voice was a little squeaky, as if he'd used it too much when it was breaking. Miranda turned a moment, and looked up and down the empty highway. Then she swung back. She had a big friendly smile now. She'd constructed it while her back was turned to him, and now it was as good as she could make it.

"Just five minutes late? I wonder...Harold...if you'd do me a big favour and just let me have some gas? You see, I'm right out."

Harold also looked out at the empty road. "Gee...that's a problem. You see, I just don't have the authority to open up the pumps after we've closed for the night. Mr Ozark wouldn't like that."

"Who is Mr Ozark?"

"It's Mr Ozark who owns the gas station."

"It says it's Mr Happy's gas station on that sign."

Harold came forward a little. He stood just beside the kiosk, where it cast a deep shadow.

"Oh, that's just a name Mr Ozark thought up."

"So there is no Mr Happy?"

"No."

Miranda's smile had not withstood this exchange. She felt it curling at the edges like an old sandwich. She abandoned it before it walked and looked business-like instead. She reached for her handbag again.

"Listen, Harold. What if I were to offer you...five dollars, say, just to open up the pumps for me and let me have some gas?"

Harold lifted up his cap and pushed some sandy hair back away from his forehead. He was just a boy, Miranda thought.

"Gee, I'm real sorry, but I just can't...."

"Ten dollars?"

"I'm sorry, I truly am, but Mr Ozark's rules are pretty definite. I just can't serve anyone after six."

Miranda put the handbag back on the car seat. Harold moved some stones around with his toe, then shot her a look she couldn't work out.

"You got enough gas to get to the next station?"

"I don't know. Where's the next station?"

"West?"

"Yes."

"That'd be at the junction with Interstate Forty. That's forty-one point four miles from here. You got enough gas for that?"

"Fuck knows. I don't know how long the warning light was on before I noticed it. What is there between here and Interstate Forty?"

"Nothing. Just desert ma'am."

"I see. And the other way?"

"Wickenburg's the first town ma'am. That's forty-five point six miles."

Miranda considered the figures. What if she set off and got about twenty miles? It would be pitch dark. She'd have to sleep in the car. Walk in the morning. Get gas in a can. Get a lift back to the car. She didn't like it. The feeling of wading through sand and sagebrush came back. She must persuade this boy somehow.

"Listen, Harold. Is Mr Ozark in the house?"

"No ma'am. He's got a house out the other side of Wickenburg. Forty eight miles away exactly."

What was all this distance shit? Miranda looked at Harold, trying to appraise if he were being funny. Or was he a bit simple? She thought a minute. A bright idea came.

"Listen Harold. What if you were to telephone Mr Ozark? Or let me speak to him. I'm sure he'd let you bend the rules a little in the circumstances. Only five minutes late. A woman travelling on her own, right out of petrol."

"You from Boston or someplace?"

"What?"

"Petrol's a kind of a fancy word for gas ain't it? Are you English?"

This was getting ridiculous. The boy wanted to make small talk for God's sake.

"Yes, I'm English. Now, what about that telephone?"

"Telephone's gone down."

"What? You mean it's broken?"

"Sure. Mr Ozark got mad at it. Broke it right up against the wall. Slam! Just like that. He's got some temper, Mr Ozark." Harold looked uneasy as soon as he'd said these words. He looked along the road towards the east. "Oh, I ain't saying nothing against Mr Ozark. But he sure as hell has a temper!"

Miranda looked at the boy. In spite of her situation, she felt a twinge of sympathetic interest in his nervous glances along the road, and his obvious

fear of this Mr Ozark. But behind her facade of calm there was a seething rout of demons screaming and stamping their feet with impatience and frustration. She needed to get back on that road, back into her drift into deep space. Urgent drift. What could she do? Without much hope, she tried bribery again.

"Listen Harold..." she opened her handbag, "...I've got about fifty dollars in cash on me right now. You can have it all, every cent, if you just give me five gallons of gas."

Harold was already shaking his head. One foot insinuated itself backwards a few inches in the dust, as if reluctant to remain out there at the end of Harold's leg. "No way ma'am. I'm really sorry, but no way. Mr Ozark - well, he'd be so mad at me if I did that..."

"For fuck's sake Harold! Mr Ozark's probably in his house right now, isn't he? Do his ears twitch when he hears a gas pump working forty miles away?"

"Forty eight miles away."

"Well - do they?"

"I just can't do it ma'am. I'm sorry."

"Well, what do you suggest I do?"

Harold looked into infinity over her shoulder. "Me ma'am? Gee, that's a tough one. I guess you might hitch a ride, but there's some strange characters around you know, at night. On the roads, at night."

"I can take care of myself, don't you worry!"

"Oh, sure ma'am, I'm sure you can. It's just, well, there's some strange people on the roads. At night."

"Well anyway, hitching a ride is no good to me. I need my car. Hey - are you going back to Wickenburg tonight?"

"No ma'am. I stay out here."

"Do you have a car? Is there a car parked out the back of the house?"

"No ma'am. I don't drive. Mr Ozark brings me out here."

"And he's not coming to get you tonight?"

"Nope."

The sun had reached that stage in its sinking when the shadows seemed to lengthen even as you watched them. Miranda stood looking at the dark shapes creeping across the dusty ground. The shadows of the gas pumps, the kiosk, her car. The earth was turning, but she was still. Stranded. Beached. She took a deep breath.

"OK. Thanks to your Mr Ozark's rules, I'm stuck here aren't I? I'll spend the night in my car then. Will that satisfy you? I'll sleep in my car and fill up in the morning when you unlock these sodding pumps. What time do you open in the morning?"

Harold's voice squeaked between octaves. "Well, there's a problem right there ma'am..."

"What's that? Mr Ozark doesn't like people sleeping in their cars at his station?"

"No - it's that tomorrow's the Lord's Day. We don't open Sundays."

"Jesus Christ!"

"Amen!"

For a second, Miranda wanted to hit this little punk. She wanted to grind his nose in the dust. But there wasn't a trace of irony in his face, or triumph. He really must be simple. Leading his life according to a simple set of rules. Besides, he was scared. Definitely scared of this Ozark character. But what the fuck was she going to do?

Harold cleared his throat. "There is one thing. Mr Ozark is coming out here tomorrow morning. I don't know what he'll say, but he might open up the pumps specially. I don't know."

That seemed to close the conversation as far as Harold was concerned. He went into the kiosk and flicked a switch. The lights on the gas pumps went off. Then he flicked another switch, and the big sign saying "Mr Happy's Gas Station" went out. Instantly the desert seemed to press closer, and Miranda shivered a little. As the sun went down, the warmth was draining out of the air fast. A big truck thundered by, heading east. She realised it was the only vehicle that had passed since she'd been there.

Harold had finished in the kiosk. He turned out the lights in there, and came out. He paused as he locked the door. Then gave Miranda a longer, more direct look than he had done so far. She met his gaze angrily. She wasn't just going to go away and cry in her car. Let him feel guilty. His eyes were pale, like his skin. He was so fair as to be almost albino.

He put a hand to his chin. "You know, I have this funny feeling I know you!"

Instantly, Miranda saw it coming. This was all she needed.

Harold was looking at her hard. A sort of half smile started to appear on his face. "Yeah! I've seen you on TV haven't I!"

What could he have seen? It must have been old, whatever it was.

"It's possible...you might have."

"Yeah...I got it. The Carltons. You were in The Carltons!"

"That was a long time ago..."

"Our local station was running a repeat of the whole darned thing last year in the afternoons. I never missed an episode. Gee - I got it! You were the English governess..Miss, Miss..."

"Miss Seymour." Might as well get it over with.

"Miss Seymour! Wow! Those kids sure gave you a hard time Miss Seymour, huh? I don't know how you stood those brats!"

He was transformed. His shuffling nervousness was gone. He looked as if he might explode with excitement. He took a couple of steps towards her.

"So, what are you doing out this way Miss Seymour? They send you out here to get a break from those kids?"

Miranda took an involuntary step back towards her car. "Now hold on Harold. It's only television. It's not real. I'm not Miss Seymour - I am...myself."

Harold stared into some inner place for a moment, then he blushed and looked at the sky. "Gee! That was real stupid of me huh? I'm sorry - er..." he wiped his hands on his jeans, "...could I shake your hand Miss...er..."

Reluctantly Miranda held out a hand. "Solheim. Mrs Miranda Solheim."

He took her hand and shook it reverently. Then he backed off a couple of feet and started a kind of breathless tuneless noise.

"A da da dee, a da da dee, a dat dat da da da dee! That's some catchy theme tune that show had huh? I bet you catch yourself whistling that in the tub don't you Mrs Solheim?"

"No."

"So what brings you out this way Mrs Solheim? You on vacation?"

"Yes - sort of."

There was a pause. Harold couldn't take his eyes off her. It was as if she might fly up into the air over the forecourt and hover above him, a celestial being. She broke the moment crudely. Maybe she could milk this sudden fan worship to get out of this hell hole.

"So, as a Carltons fan, are you going to give poor Miss Seymour some gas, Harold?"

He looked genuinely distressed.

"Gee, I'm real sorry about this. This is the most awful thing that ever happened here. I just can't break the rules, even though I want to help out."

"So I've got to spend the night in my car, and hope that your Mr Ozark will open up the pumps for me in the morning?"

"Well...I guess that's about it, Mrs Solheim." Then, incredibly, he was turning round, heading back to the house. She couldn't believe it. Was that it? She watched him go slowly up the steps, pause on the porch, pull open the screen door, and disappear inside. Seething, Miranda grabbed her handbag, scabbled for her cigarettes, and lit up. She called out:

"I'm going to smoke all I sodding well like! I don't care what the rules say!" There was no response. She got back into the car and locked the door. The sun was just a thin segment of orange on the horizon now. The landscape was nearly dark. No lights showed up on the long straight highway. The temperature was dropping down the scale. She looked in vain for a rug or something on the back seat to cover up with. Nothing. It was going to be a fucking uncomfortable night. She thought about drastic actions, but they all seemed unreal. The only solution was patience. She hoped to God this Mr Ozark was able to bend his own rules.

Off to the other side of the road, far off, there was a line of low hills that marked the edge of the flat desert. The moon was coming up over the top of the hills. As she watched the sun vanish, and the moon rise, Miranda felt the cold start to penetrate her limbs. She started the engine, to run the heater,

and after five minutes the engine coughed and died. That really was it then. Completely out of gas. She wondered if Harold had heard the engine and thought she might drive off. No light showed in the house. Had he gone to bed? She watched the red and orange afterglow fading in the western sky. In spite of the cold, she started to feel drowsy. After all, she hadn't slept since the night before last. Her thoughts started to wander away from the present into the past.

The knock on the window made her leap forwards in a panic, banging her arm on the steering wheel. She looked out to see Harold with a flashlight. She wound the window down a fraction.

Harold looked sheepish. "I was thinking, Mrs Solheim, you could come in the house if you want. It must be real cold out here."

Miranda weighed it up. She decided she could handle anything he threw at her. It was better than freezing to death out here. She got out of the car, and followed Harold's frail silhouette as he led the way with the flashlight towards the house.

Inside, the first thing Harold did was to lock the door. "Mr Ozark's rules" he explained. They were in a bare hallway with four or five doors opening off it. Harold opened the first door on the right and led her into what was presumably the sitting room. A single light bulb dangled from the ceiling, illuminating a comfortless room with cheap shoddy furnishings. It wasn't much warmer than outside. Miranda glanced towards an electric bar heater standing on a threadbare rug in the middle of the room. It wasn't on. Harold saw her looking.

"You cold? Thing is, the heater works on a kind of a slot meter thing, and I'm clean out of quarters."

Miranda found a couple of quarters in her purse and gave them to Harold. He pushed them into the meter, and the fire buzzed and crackled into life.

"Mind if I sit down?"

"No, make yourself feel right at home Miss Seymour!"

"Solheim. Mrs Miranda Solheim." Was he doing this deliberately

Harold looked away, towards the window. "Your husband know where you are?"

"What?"

"I just...I was just wondering...your husband's maybe expecting you someplace? Tonight? Where are you headed?"

Miranda resisted the impulse to tell him to fuck off and mind his own business.

"I was on my way to see someone else..." She thought quickly, "...my sister. My sister lives in Los Angeles."

"L.A.? Gee, that's four hundred and seven point five miles from here. You'd have been driving all night Mrs Solheim!"

"Is it as far as that? Well, I...I might have stopped over at a motel somewhere."

Miranda sat down on the black pvc settee in front of the fire to close the subject. She took in the rest of the room. An armchair in the same hideous black material. A reproduction of Salvador Dali's "Christ of St John of the Cross" on the wall. A bookcase with a few cheap paperbacks and some car magazines scattered on its shelves.

"Does this house belong to Mr Ozark?"

"Sure."

"Doesn't provide much in the way of home comforts, does he? Haven't you even got a television?"

"Used to have a television, but Mr Ozark took it away. Said the station didn't make enough money to support a television. I got a radio though, in the kitchen."

"Are you going to make me a coffee or something?"

"Sure - do you like milk?"

"Yes please."

"We're out of milk - sorry."

"I'll take it black then."

"OK. Do you take sugar?"

"No."

"That's lucky. We're out of sugar too. I like sugar myself. Mr Ozark said he'd bring some out this week."

"How long does Mr Ozark leave you out here for at a time, Harold?"

"Oh...maybe a month, maybe six weeks."

Miranda was horrified. "Six weeks! Stuck out here on your own! I'd go up the wall!"

"Pardon me?"

"Up the wall - crazy - stuck out here all that time."

"Well, Mrs Solheim, the thing is.." Harold hesitated, then seemed to decide something. He perched on the edge of the sofa next to Miranda, and lowered his voice, as if he might be overheard. "The thing is, Mrs Solheim, that Mr Ozark thinks this is the best place for me to be. He says I'm like Christ, sent out for forty days and forty nights into the wilderness. Only I got it easier than Christ, 'cause Christ was tempted all that time by the Devil. And out here I ain't got no Devil to tempt me." He lowered his voice almost to a whisper now. "And the thing is....you won't say nothing will you Mrs Solheim?"

"I won't say anything to anyone Harold."

"Well...I have given way to temptation in the past, and Mr Ozark thinks this is the safest way for me to be - you know - out of the way of temptation and all. You see...I know you won't say nothing to anyone Mrs Solheim?"

"No, of course not."

“Well, I could have got sent away Mrs Solheim, if Mr Ozark hadn’t stepped in and vouched for me. And there was things he knew that the law hadn’t found out about yet. He sure saved me from a heap of trouble. Mr Ozark’s my preacher you see, Mrs Solheim, and he’s my protector.”

“I thought he owned this gas station?”

“Sure he does. And another one the other side of Wickenburg. But the money they make is all for his ministry.”

“I see. But what about your family - haven’t you got a family that you’d like to see more of? A mother and father?”

Harold stood up. “I guess. Well, I’ll make that coffee.”

While Harold was out of the room, Miranda turned over these fragments of information. It was pretty clear this boy was being exploited. Stuck out here in this miserable half-furnished house for weeks on end, terrified to break Mr Ozark’s rules. Ozark. Strange name. From nowhere another thought came - maybe there was no Mr Ozark! Maybe Harold made it all up. Maybe he just wanted to exercise a little power, a devious tyrant in his lonely little kingdom. The thought was a disturbing one, and she pushed it away. Harold wasn’t dangerous, he was just a simple boy. She decided she needed to take a leak. She went out into the hallway.

Harold came out of the kitchen to point out the door of the bathroom to her. There was a light cord dangling outside it.

When she came out of the bathroom, Miranda thought she’d glance into one or two of the other rooms. She could hear Harold making coffee in the kitchen. One door was ajar, and she pushed it open gently, so that it wouldn’t creak. There was no window, but the moon shone into the room through a small skylight. But there was nothing illuminated by its pale light that she could recognise. There seemed to be some kind of glass cases along the walls. She flicked on the light switch.

A gust of hissing and rattling greeted the light. In the glass tanks that lined the room, what seemed like hundreds of rattlesnakes slithered and reared and arched about each other. Miranda recoiled, trying to fight down the scream rising in her throat. But it wouldn’t stay down, and she stumbled out of the room into the hallway with a gasping shriek of fear and disgust. She hunkered down in the hallway, her stomach heaving. If there had been any food in there she’d have thrown up, but instead her stomach twisted up into a hard knot that hurt. Harold came rushing out of the kitchen. When he saw what had happened, he closed the door of the snake room. He seemed more puzzled than angry.

“Mrs Solheim! You didn’t ought to have gone in there! I showed you where the bathroom was. Why did you go in there?”

Miranda pulled herself together. She stood up slowly, putting a hand on the wall to steady herself. Why *had* she gone in there?

“I...I’m sorry Harold. I was just being nosy. But...I mean...is that a hobby of yours?”

"Sure". A fatuous smug expression came onto his face. The expression of every boy proud of his collection of whatever it is he collects. "Caught them all myself too, in the brush and the rocks around the station."

"But..aren't they..."

"Poisonous? Sure as hell they are. You gotta be real careful how you pick them up. I got a kind of a stick with a fork at the end - keep it right there in the room with them. You wanna see how I pick them up?"

"Christ! No!"

"Well, it ain't so difficult. You just pin 'em down with the stick and then reach down real easy and grab them just behind the head. Then you can do what you want see, 'cause they can't bite you as long as you hold on. Got names for 'em all too!"

"I..I see. Don't tell me any more."

But Harold was on a roll. His eyes shone with enthusiasm. He became confidential.

"You won't let on if I tell you a little secret Mrs Solheim?"

"No."

He was grinning now, at some private joke. "There's one big diamond-back in there. Nearly six feet long. Caught him last summer. Well, I call him 'Mr Ozark'. He!He! I like to get him mad, then he puffs himself up and rattles his tail like crazy and he's just the spitting image of the real Mr Ozark!" Harold suddenly looked doubtfully at Miranda. "Don't get me wrong Mrs Solheim - I ain't saying nothing against Mr Ozark. But he sure as hell has a temper. You wouldn't say anything about this to Mr Ozark tomorrow, would you?"

"Of course not. Can we go and drink that coffee now?"

Harold fetched the cups from the kitchen, and Miranda went to sit down again on the sofa in the sitting room. She realised how incredibly tired she was now. Her eyes were aching from the long day's drive, and she closed them for a moment. In the darkness, a thought formed. A thought about Harold, and Mr Ozark protecting him. About Harold tormenting the snake. Why would he want to get back at Mr Ozark? She opened her eyes. Harold came in with the coffee. He put hers down on the low table at the end of the sofa, and sat down opposite her in the armchair. He had got hold of one of those Rubik's cube things, and was rotating it absently in his hands. He was just a young boy. What was going on here?

"Harold...this is none of my business....but is Mr Ozark blackmailing you?"

Harold looked blank, as if he didn't know the word. "Pardon me?"

"Are you working out here for Mr Ozark because you're afraid that he'll tell the police about...whatever it was you did?"

Harold's hands gripped the cube. "No way. No ma'am. Mr Ozark wouldn't let me down."

Miranda let it drop. There was something wrong, but she couldn't put her finger on what it was. The idea that Mr Ozark only existed in Harold's head

was the most worrying possibility. Mr Ozark. Weren't there some Ozark mountains somewhere? And what about his confusion over whether she was a real person or a character in a soap?

Harold's thoughts had returned to her television career too. He cleared his throat. "I...I guess you must be in a lot of television stuff huh?"

Well, to be fair, he didn't have a television. "I've....given that up now, more or less."

"Oh, why's that?"

Bless his naive little socks. "Well...when I was Miss Seymour in The Carltons I was young and quite good looking..."

"Very good looking I'd say."

Oh my God. "Well, I'm a good deal older now, and there aren't so many parts for...middle-aged women on television."

"You ain't middle-aged are you?"

The boy was on the level. He was absolutely on the level. It was flattering, in a crazy way.

"Well, tell that to the casting directors. I could get parts when I was young by looking good and being a reasonable actress. But when you've got to my age you can only get parts by being a damned good actress. And I'm not."

"Well - you're sure a star in my book."

The boy was blushing even. This was unbelievable. He wasn't going to come on was he, for Christ's sake? No, luckily he was too shy to take it any further. That would have been all she needed.

But Harold did have something up his sleeve. He cleared his throat again.

"You know Mrs Solheim. I been wonderin'....about your husband."

Her husband? What the fuck did he know about her husband?

"You see, I listen to the radio a lot in the day, and I specially like listening to the police reports. Now, yesterday, there were four homicides in Arizona. There was a Mrs Edna Schneider hacked to death with an axe in her own back yard in Lake Havasu City. They picked up a suspect for that one - guy who'd bought the axe in a hardware store earlier in the day - but they ain't got a motive. Then there was a Mr Alexander Cabeza who was crushed under the wheels of a blue station wagon by an unidentified man following an apparent dispute over a parking space. The other two were shot in the head - one in Phoenix and one in Tucson - but I got distracted by a car coming in for gas, and I only remember the names. There was a Gerry Snyder, and a Frank T. Solheim. Now that surely couldn't be your husband, could it, Mrs Solheim?"

He doesn't know anything. Breathe easily. Like a drama exercise. Improvise. Now: "Of course not! My husband's name is Andrew, and he's away on a skiing trip in Oregon. Do you think I'm a murderess? On the run from justice?" Perfect.

"No, no, I surely don't. It's just one of these coincidences that happen. But I did think maybe if it was your husband that had been shot in the head -

twice I think it was - then it'd be best you heard about it now, you know. So it wouldn't be a shock later on, you know."

"Well, that's thoroughly thoughtful and decent of you, Harold. And if I'd said 'My God! That's my husband! I must get back to Tucson!' you'd have filled up my car with gas and let me go, wouldn't you?"

Harold hadn't considered this one. The Rubik's cube tumbled round and round in his hands like he was spin-drying it. "Well, that's a hard one. I'm expressly forbidden by Mr Ozark..."

Miranda interrupted him. She could change the subject here. "You're enjoying this aren't you?"

Harold stopped tumbling.

"You're stuck out here in the middle of nowhere, and now you've got a chance to wield a little power haven't you? That's why you collect the snakes, isn't it? So you can have something to bully? And now you've got me where you want me, haven't you?"

"It's just the rules..."

"It's nothing to do with rules. You know what? I don't even believe in your Mr Ozark! I think you made him up as an excuse."

Harold put the cube down. His thin face was agitated. His finger wagged at her. "Don't say that now! That's wrong. You'll find out tomorrow."

"Are you telling the truth Harold? Mr Ozark is coming out here tomorrow?"

"Sure. He comes out every Sunday to take the money out of the safe."

"That's a fine Christian mission! I thought he was a preacher? Why isn't he in his church on Sunday?"

Harold was on the march now, up and down the room. His agitation couldn't be contained any other way. Miranda was afraid she might have stirred him up too much. But hell, why shouldn't she stir him up? It was thanks to him that she was here at all. Well, let him start to regret it. He needed a shake anyway. This Ozark was a bastard, and she would get Harold to acknowledge that fact properly.

"How long have you been working out here, Harold?"

"Two years, one month and sixteen days."

"And how many holidays have you had?"

"I've had seventeen full days, and one half day on account of the pumps needed maintenance work."

"Seventeen days off in two years! And what does Mr Ozark pay you?"

"That's private information that Mr Ozark said I wasn't to let out."

"Can't you see that he's just taking advantage?"

"You mustn't talk like that Mrs Solheim! That's the voice of the Tempter speaking through you!"

This shit was starting to get to her. Couldn't the boy understand anything? This Ozark had filled his head so full with the Bible and rules that he couldn't see he was being screwed. The desire to shake him up was overwhelming. If

there really was a Mr Ozark, then it was thanks to his bloody rules that she was trapped here, and she was as much a victim as Harold was. Ozark was one of these fucking vampires that lived on other people, sucking them dry.

"Mr Ozark is an exploiting bully as far as I can make out."

"He looks after my family! He's a good man!"

She had him on the run now. He was pacing up and down the room like crazy. She had him squirming.

"Who's your family?"

"Ma and three sisters?"

"What happened to your Pa?"

"Listen, I ain't supposed to talk to strangers..."

Miranda threw back her head and laughed. Theatrically. But it was funny too. Mr Ozark didn't want Harold talking to strangers. But he'd invented a rule that meant Harold had a whole night with a stranger to get through. She'd get to the bottom of this.

"Does Mr Ozark stay with your mother and sisters?"

"No - he don't stay. He just visits."

"Just visits, huh? But you're never there, are you? How does he treat your mother and sisters? Does he have a bad temper there too?"

Harold was going up and down, up and down the room. She had a shrewd idea.

"Had you ever thought that Mr Ozark was the Tempter, Harold? Had you ever thought that he might be the Devil himself?"

The effect on Harold of these words was startling. He stared at her with a look of intense horror, but with something pleading in his eyes, as if he was in need of help. Then he drew out a tiny crucifix that hung on a chain around his neck and which had been hidden beneath his tee-shirt. He held it towards her, B-movie style, warding off a vampire.

"Get thee behind me Satan!" he exclaimed. Then he moved towards her, his eyes shining with that strange mixture of horror and pleading. Miranda was terrified. She'd gone too far. What was he going to do? In a panic, she grabbed her handbag and ran out into the hall, thrusting her hand into it as she went. Yes. Her hand closed around the grip of the small handgun. Harold was coming after her, and she whirled and pointed the pistol straight at his face as he came out of the sitting room door. He stood stock still. Lowered the crucifix. And his jaw.

"I put two bullets through my husband's head in Tucson yesterday. I've not got a lot to lose if I put the rest through yours!" She didn't know why she had told him that. Why hadn't she just pointed the gun at him?

Harold was goggling at her in just the same way as when he'd realised she was in The Carltons. "You killed Frank T. Solheim in Tucson yesterday?"

"Yes."

As they continued to stand in their frozen positions it dawned on Miranda why she had said it. It was the relief of being able to share it, even with this

strange boy. She looked at him, his eyes now lowered to the gun barrel. Even now, she felt as if some of the weight of that heavy secret had been shifted. It had been an unendurable burden to carry alone, even for a night and a day. She was glad that someone else knew what she'd done.

While her body continued to stay stock still, her thoughts raced on further, and she realised why she was glad that Harold knew. There was an affinity between them. He might not see it yet, but she was going to force him to see it. She felt renewed strength and control. She weighed the gun in her hand, its handle snug against her palm.

"You know why you made me want to say that to you about Mr Ozark, Harold? It's because you're just like I was for years and years and years. Terrified of some bullying bastard who's sucking the life out of you like a vampire. God! The world needs sweeping clean of these people!"

"If you mean Mr Ozark...."

"Shut up! I understand your Mr Ozark even if you think the sun shines out of his ass! That's the way with these vampires. They can fool you for years and years."

Harold's stare was disconcerting. He was frightened, obviously. But there was also that look of admiration that she'd seen before. He pointed at the gun.

The rest of this story, and a further thirteen stories can be found in
RATTLESNAKE AND OTHER TALES