



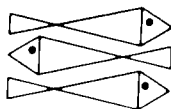
# The Shrewsdale Exit

A novel by John Buell

# THE SHREWSDALE EXIT

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John Buell



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THE  
SHREWSDALE  
EXIT

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# 1

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They decided to pull in at the Howard Johnson's.

It was an innocent enough decision. They had been driving for over two hours, and when they saw the big orange sign and the crisp lights in the young evening, she said, "Let's stop and get something to eat," and he nodded, reluctantly, for he wanted to keep going, and had just enough time to signal, check behind him, shift lanes, brake and get into the exit at 50 m.p.h., which was faster than he intended. He relaxed, let the station wagon drift down to 30, to 25, time out is time out, no point rushing it.

"Can I have some M & M's when we come out?" asked the little girl.

"We'll see," said the woman. "You don't want to be sick in the car."

"I won't be sick."

"We'll see."

“Well, can’t we just get them?” She was six years old and very persistent.

He grinned at the enormous importance of the M & M’s, turned right at the traffic light and began looking for the driveway to the motel.

“Sure,” he said. After all, they were on holiday.

From the throughway the spotlight restaurant looked airy and spacious, but now they were passing through a cluster of signs and overhanging wires and poles, three gas stations, competing hamburger stands, a chicken counter, the hardly discernible entrance to a shopping plaza, a Dairy-Bar, a liquor store, some close to the road, some far, all with parking space at a premium, and finally on the right he saw the motel sign, pulled into the uncrowded parking lot and stopped in a clear strip near the restaurant.

He got out and stretched, deliberately noticed the clear, darkening evening, waited for his wife, who was putting tissues in her purse, while the little girl ran ahead. They locked the car, it was full of holiday equipment, and started inside. They didn’t look around too closely outside, they had no reason to.

He was in his mid-thirties, she a little younger. He was tall and heavy-boned, going slightly to weight, which made him look shorter. He was wearing tan cotton pants and a golf shirt. He had hair just long enough to be combed, with sideburns as far as the ear lobes, a bony pleasant face that would have looked hard but for a straight nose and clear blue eyes, almost washed out to gray, the sort that catch light and look watery. They made him appear boyish.

For a woman she too was tall, a natural redhead with hair worn long, touched up and dressed in varying tones.

She had a long thin face with the regular features of makeup ads but without their emptiness, swift intelligent brown eyes, a rounded but muscular body, breasts firm and high, long legs topped by noticeable buttocks. She wore a short dress about the size of a one-piece bathing suit and wooden-soled sandals that made her take short steps, a fashion that emphasized a sexiness she was probably not aware of. It made her get looked at.

The restaurant wasn't crowded at that hour, although it had quite a few customers. The little girl picked a booth unselfconsciously and her parents joined her. She had light hair, pony-tailed, mostly her mother's face, eyes just like her father's, red jeans raggedly cut at the knees and a T-shirt colored like a barber's pole. She went well with the crisp cheerfulness of the place.

They ordered sandwiches and beer, a Coke for the little girl, and were served in good time. They weren't in a hurry. They were going to the coast, to work their way along the ocean, camping where possible and staying in boarding houses when necessary. They talked as they ate, and in a short time they were about finished.

"I forgot to tell you," he said. "I did get that kid's tent, they don't need it right now," referring to the friends he'd borrowed it from.

"For me?" said the little girl.

"Yeah, and for the friends you're gonna be meeting. Like a dorm, it's fun. We'll all have a little more room."

His wife looked at him and her expression added: and privacy. And he raised his glass in exaggerated self-satisfied glee. She laughed.

"Did you get Bill's long lens?" she asked.

"And a clamp, I didn't have room for the tripod."



"What's a long lens?" asked the little girl.

"For the camera," he said. "It makes far things look close."

"Oh."

He got up, left a tip, and went to the cashier while the mother made sure the little girl went to the washroom.

When they joined him, he bought the M & M's.

Outside it was darker, a little cooler, the lights brighter and obscuring the dim glow of the sky. In the dark and under the lights, less clutter showed and things seemed farther away than they were. The road was busy with unhurried traffic, people coming back from supper or going bowling or just going, big trailers that would work all night, restless kids gearing up for the evening's fun. The stand-up eateries were busy, cars parked askew, stopping long enough to pick up a computerized hamburger, everything from heavy men in Cadillacs to youngsters on bikes who thought the food was great. At the edge of the Dairy-Bar lot, close by, three helmeted and weirdly costumed toughs sat on big motorbikes and drank milk from waxed cartons.

At the car the woman said to the little girl, "You might want to go to sleep later," and began clearing the back seat, with some difficulty. From the inside it was just another domestic chore, from the outside it was squirming long legs and wiggling buttocks at a low angle, and finally a straightening up with a toss of hair and a two-handed brush-back that thrust her breasts forward. It was visible and watched, in silence, from the Dairy-Bar, as usual and normal as ice cream on a Sunday afternoon fifty years ago.

He made sure they were belted in and eased the wagon

through the parking lot as he put on the lights and checked the gauges. He slid into the casual local traffic, pacing it slowly so he wouldn't have to brake or stop too often, took the green light, and a short distance away swung into the ramp, where there was no traffic, and onto the throughway. He let the car gain little by little and relaxed into the pace of the driving. The noise of the airstream made talking difficult and the radio hard to hear, but the M & M's were asked for, some given, and the rest tucked away out of sight. They settled into the ride, watching the road and the signs, and talking every now and then in a semi-shout.

It started happening about fifteen minutes later.

At first it didn't seem like anything. He saw one headlight behind him in the distance, one light in both mirrors. He thought it was a car, one light obscured by the way he was sitting. He moved a little. Still the one light, and still the idea that it was a car, a one-eyed car. He didn't think any more about it.

The next time he looked he saw two lights. They were too far apart to be a car, and he wondered vaguely what size truck would have lights that wide. He entered a long curve and the rear view went black. He forgot about it. He felt like going faster than the posted 65, but he had a fully loaded wagon, at night, with a family.

A little while after he came out of the curve he looked behind and saw three lights taking up the entire width of the throughway and gaining on him. Motorcycles. Something made him feel uneasy—the nudge of an idea that they weren't going to pass. He didn't say anything. He sat up a little higher, watching front and back alternately. His

wife sensed his movement and looked at him. She thought he might be getting ready for a speeder, and she turned away, but not immediately.

They came up fast, well over 80, got behind the wagon and stayed there. Their bikes roared. Their lights filled the inside of the wagon. The woman turned, first to one side, then the other, and saw the three lights spread in a row across the road, pacing their car.

"What's that?" she asked, her raised voice quavering.

"Motorbikes."

"What are they doing?"

"Playing games," he said. "Is Patty asleep?" He hadn't heard the little girl and he didn't want to turn around.

"Yes."

"Check the doors, make sure they're locked."

The toughs held their formation, swaying now and then to put light into the car and barking their horns.

He held his course. He felt unreal, quiet and icy, suppressing what he knew to be a useless and dangerous anger, his mind sorting out the possibilities, none of them good: get to an exit, try to out-race them, car-fight them, attract attention, hope for the police, or . . .

A sign said the next town was twenty-five miles away. The throughway going back was far to the left behind bush and cut rock. They were on a desolate stretch, and not by accident.

He put on his emergency blinkers, floored the pedal and raced ahead at 75. The car was smooth at 80, and became a furious vibration at 85. He dropped back to 80, he could do twenty-five miles in something like twenty minutes. He checked his watch: it was 9:40. It was also no use.

They came up behind again, zigzagging, and honking, and this time the two outside toughs moved up alongside the front windows while the third one stayed behind. The noise was deafening.

"Close your vent," he shouted to his wife. He didn't want them tossing things into the car.

The toughs were visible now. Adorned helmets, the one on the right with horns, sleeveless jackets studded and riveted and covered with graffiti, straggly hair and stubbles like beards scissored in the dark, insignia of all sorts, metal armbands, gauntlets that were probably metal-painted gardening gloves, and fixed grins like psychotic grimaces under what looked like yellow-tinted shooting glasses.

The tough near the woman was making obscene thrusts into his saddle and beckoning her with jerks of his head. The one near the man was signaling him to pull over by pointing to the side of the road. When he didn't pull over, the tough on the bike showed a heavy chain and threatened with it. As if on cue, a heavy clanging thump rattled off the end of the wagon, then another. The tough in the back was hitting the fender, or at the blinking light.

The little girl was awake by now, bemused and terrified, sitting up stiff and wide-eyed. She only uttered, "Daddy!" in a soft sharp despair. It almost unnerved him. The woman reached over and touched her.

"Don't take off your belts!" he yelled as he saw his wife going to comfort the child.

He'd made up his mind now, without choice. There was no exit to take, he couldn't race them, and there were no police. He jammed on the brakes. At that speed it didn't stop the car suddenly, but it did slow it enough to cause

the back tough to heave into the wagon and go off balance. He didn't spill. But he had to fall back to regain control.

Then he put the pedal to the floor, edged the car to the left and swung as quickly as was possible to the right, hoping the lash of the wagon would upset the bike on his left. It didn't, the tough had had more practice, he swung the bike out and fell slightly behind.

The wagon swayed to the right on its own, almost out of control, causing the bike on that side to fall back, and continued its swerve into the stopping strip. He drove on the strip until things were steady and finally got back on the asphalt.

He was covered with sweat, his wife was rigid with her two hands on the dash. The little girl had buried her face in the back seat. No one spoke.

He watched the three lights cluster in the distance, saw them pick up speed and separate across the road. His wife turned to see. In seconds they could hear them again.

They were passing this time, slowly, grimacing and dancing in their saddles, two on the left, one on the right, until there was a bike in front and slightly to the side of each headlight and one ahead on the far left. Then they held steady, a grim, relative motionlessness. He tried to ease the car back imperceptibly, he was expecting something.

It came.

The two toughs ahead of the car suddenly turned in their seats and threw something at the windshield, two containers which burst and spread an ooze over the glass. Oil. The woman shrieked.

He couldn't see. He eased on the brakes, holding on a

remembered course, quickly flicked on the wipers and the washing jet, but that only spread the oil evenly. It would take too long, he'd have to stop. A blind car, the bastards, I wish I had a gun. He felt the wheels crunch over the stopping strip, he was going off the road. Then something soft, and he knew the car was on grass. It tilted slightly and rolled to a stop.

He jammed the lever in park, snapped off his belt.

"Keep everything on, lean on the horn, lock up."

He got out and quickly slammed the door after him. He was shaking with anger and fear, over-aware of everything, for a moment surprised how far down the embankment the car had come. The horn started a steady whine; the headlights shone askew along the grass and into the bush, weak against the night, the blinkers and wipers keeping time.

Two of them up ahead were off their bikes and approaching with chains. The third was closer, just getting off his bike. There was no use standing still for it. He ran to the third tough, crashed into him in full stride, grabbed hair in two hands, pulled down and brought his knee up hard into the tough's face. He felt teeth loosen.

He gripped him by the lower neck, still two-handed, and was going to swing him against the other two, but a heavy chain struck him across the shoulder, lashing also into the tough he was holding. "Ya dumb fucker, you're gettin *me*!" He tightened his grip, felt the flesh tearing, tried to heave and turn. The chain came down again, this time right, on his head and neck and shoulders.

He heard glass breaking, the screaming of woman and child, and sank to nothing under heavy kicks, hoping distantly not to live.

## 2

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Maybe, his own voice said, maybe if you called the manager. Maybe, his voice answered, but the motel shouldn't be this goddam cold, they don't even have blankets here. Furiously he fumbled in a long languorous reach for a phone, but there was no phone, and then there was no motel but only some confusing thing that was cold and dark and stretched forever. Still he kept reaching and reaching, no object in mind, it was just important somehow to ignore the pain and keep making gigantic efforts, huge decidings to heave past some point, some edge, past a strange and environing nothingness, a tightening fear that was casually natural and utterly hateful. Then it all went away, and what seemed like the cold night entered his stirring consciousness.

He was on all fours in tall grass. He was clearly aware of his posture, could feel the grass, knew that it was night. He felt cold. He didn't move, he waited. He sensed that

something wasn't right, that soon he would understand where he was and why. He felt remote from himself somehow, as if he could step aside and watch the scene.

Then he moved his head to look up and sharp pains jolted his whole body, and with that, like a sudden image on the screen, he remembered everything and leaped to his feet with a crying moan.

Instinctively he turned around to go "back" to the car—the opposite of his last remembered direction. He stumbled and fell. Something slipped off him, a rope he thought and let it lie. It was dark, moonless, the stars clear in the non-city air. He got up again and tried to see better. Vague shapes and lumps of black that seemed closer than they were surrounded him and ended at the not totally darkened sky. The tall grass he could see as something there, but without detail.

He remembered the embankment, and tried to run "up" to get to the throughway, desperate to hurry. But it was like taking a step where there are no stairs. He fell and rolled and lost his imagined direction completely. There should be lights, he said inside, headlights, our headlights. He didn't let the implications surface—he felt cold again, and started shaking, and the pains came back. He struggled to his feet and stood still, listening. There could be no hurrying. What he heard was the thumping of his heart and the faraway screeching in his ears. Then the night sounds came through, chirps, and warbles, and calls. Finally, from far off, he thought he heard a motor.

He waited, then shifted to hear better. The noise of the high grass was like brush fire. He froze in mid-shift to find the motor again. Nothing. Painfully he turned his head slowly in a careful sweep of the dark. Suddenly the motor



was back, louder. He cupped his hands behind his ears in two tries and the motor faded, but as he kept turning he heard it better and better. He was twisted like a gymnast to his left. When he was sure of where it was coming from, he corrected his footing noisily and quickly without losing track of the sound. Loud now, a diesel, a truck, he could hear the tires. Somewhere above his head, it seemed, the truck passed, and he thought he saw the glow of lights. He had a direction.

He started walking, stumbling again through the grass and losing his way. He stopped. He had to be sure he was going straight. He looked in the only direction he could, up, to the sky, and his eyes rested primitively on a bright object almost directly to his right. He moved through the dark. Before long the tall grass disappeared abruptly, and he stopped to feel the roughly mowed surface: he was on the embankment. He checked the sky and ran up the embankment, stumbling and falling as he went. Soon he saw the flat, less black surface of the throughway. He got on the shoulder, paused, and holding panic down he turned suddenly to look down the embankment. There was nothing, only the darkness and the sound of his gulping breathing.

Without stopping to decide, he simply began walking against the traffic direction, watching the dark slope intently. Any time now, he thought, and couldn't keep down the flood of possibilities that attacked him like pain. He began seeing forms in the dark, once he investigated, and later he stopped, rigid, because he thought he heard the little girl calling him. He couldn't see from the shoulder, and realized he wouldn't see. He took to walking down the embankment, then along, then up again, combing the area.