

SCENIC BYWAYS

EPISODE 8

"ECHOES IN THE CANYONS"

by Ben Sembler

SFX RECORDER SWITCHES ON

SFX TRUCK ROLLS ON

NARRATOR

If there's a power greater than time on these roads, I've yet to come across it. I see time's ravages whenever I wash my face in still water, the beads rollin' down a growin' number of lines, or when I catch a glimpse of myself in the reflection of Old Stars side mirrors as I climb into the cab. Things decayin', breakin' down, grindin' to a slow stop. And I'm no exception. But there's a beauty in that, if you pause to consider it. Time may destroy, but it creates just as equal. It was the slow march of time that brought the wind and water to carve these shapes and forms, the natural bridges and arches that dot the canyon landscapes. Time drowned the land in an ocean and dried it up just the same. Maybe if I wait long enough, the oceans will rise here, too. Before time punches my final card. Or Old Stars'.

SFX RECORDER OFF

CREDITS UP

SFX HOWLING WIND

SFX WRENCH, MECHANICAL REPAIR WORKINGS

SFX AIR HISSING

NARRATOR

AHH!

SFX HOOD SHUTTING

NARRATOR

Well that won't do. Come on, girl, I know you've a hard time on these roads, but you've got plenty of life left in ya.

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

I made good time headin' across the desert into the canyonlands and wind-carved arches that make up the surreal landscape along the river. Always headed ever eastward. But I should have known better, that time is the only neutral force out on these roads. No good or bad to it. It's blameless, without a will or a wont.

But it's had its way with me. You might not even recognize me now. Somedays, I barely recognize myself. 'Course, that isn't the worst thing. Time brings change, and change can be good, dependin' on what you do with it. I'm changed, in some ways I know and in others I may not have even registered. Learned plenty of things out on these roads these many years. Some things quick, some slow. Some not soon enough.

(sigh)

Old Stars started a low whine at first, barely perceptible over the hum of the engine and the bump of the road. I knew what to listen for. Been with her long enough, every gasp and whimper she makes is like a second language. I shoulda heard it. Woulda, if I *had* been listenin'. But even workin' on it, that's a slow change, still. And she weren't whimperin' for long. She's like you, in that way. She'd long since lost her patience for my reveries. And when her whinin' didn't work to get my attention, it didn't take long for her to start cursin' up a storm.

RECORDER OFF

SFX DRIVING

SFX LOUD ENGINE KNOCKING SOUND

NARRATOR

Oh no, no, no, no, no.

SFX SLOW STOP.

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

How many thousands of parts make-up Old Stars? She's been my constant companion on these roads for more years than I'd like to remember, and even I couldn't count 'em all up. The parts, that is. Parts long since out of production. I can just imagine those old days, some inventor in some far off place, drawin' up designs for something so small, all to make this big piece of metal move. You remember that time we went abroad? I didn't want to go, but the money was good, and so were we. Back in the days of planes, near-instantaneous travel. The whole world a web of interwoven threads, seen from afar so strong, but up close just barely connected. I've never liked cities, you knew that, but I went. For you. The city of the future. Cleanest city I'd ever seen. And quicker than any I'd ever been to. So many people, all goin' somewhere, just to spend a spell before they went back to

where they came. It gave me vertigo, that living city, its speed. A hive of bees all buzzin' in the air, zoomin' from flower to flower, pollinatin' the world with technology, innovation, invention. The heat radiatin' off all all those vibratin' bodies made me queasy, I needed fresher air. We took a train, rode past the suburbs, out into the countryside, where the paths crisscrossed flooded land, paddies ripe with sproutin' rice. The end of the line, it seemed. Yet even there, we found factories. Producers. Inventors. People spendin' lifetimes engineerin' a single part, winnin' an award for innovation, squeezin' a hair more of efficiency out of a machine just like Old Stars. You think they're still there, across the sea? Or did a quake get 'em? Maybe there's a factory, there, and deep in the back, on a high shelf bolted to a wall, covered in dust, a box of main bearings to match the busted one in Old Stars engine.

RECORDER OFF

SFX DESERT SOUNDS

NARRATOR PANTS

SFX RECORDER ON (IN WORLD)

NARRATOR

Not sure how I went through the water so quick, but I'm gonna need to go look for some more. I've been keepin' a steady course in the direction of the river, followin' it's flow upstream, so it shouldn't be too hard to track down. Old Stars' engine is shot. It's the main bearing. I could drive, for a while at least. But no tellin' when she'd seize on me. Might even crack the engine block. Such a small part. I guess they're all small, when you think about it. Anyway, I'm leaving this tape here. The others, too. Think I'll take the recorder with me, though. So if anyone finds these, try to deliver 'em, would ya.

SFX RECORDER OFF (IN WORLD)

SFX TAPE POPS OUT

SFX TAPE INSERTS

SFX FOOTSTEPS IN DESERT

RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

Course I couldn't search that factory for the part Old Stars needs. It's too far to go, now. No spare parts or salvation waitin' for me across the ocean. I can barely make it across *this* land. We spent millenia spinnin' our web, pullin' the strands together, buildin' a connected world. And one errant wave of a walkin' stick in the forest, the rash impulse of someone or something, was all it took to tear the connections down. So tenuous from the very start. But was it ever our web, really? Were we the spider who wove it? Or was I wrong that day, in that city. Were the bees I thought I saw really mayflies, destined to live a single day, yet with so much to see and nowhere to be, just flying back in forth until they found themselves stuck in that web. Thrashin' about. Maybe that walkin' stick set us free, for a while at least. Still bound by a single day, but with plenty of twilight flyin' before we meet our final and only sunset.

RECORDER OFF

SFX DESERT SOUNDS

NARRATOR

(shouts)

Hello!

SFX ECHO "HELLO"

NARRATOR CHUCKLES

NARRATOR

Well can't say I'm stranded with all these friends, can I?

NARRATOR

(shouts)

How are ya?

SFX ECHO "HOW ARE YA?"

NARRATOR

(shouts)

Good, how are you?

SFX ECHO "GOOD, HOW ARE YOU?"

NARRATOR

(shouts)  
Seen any water?

SFX ECHO "SEEN ANY WATER?"

NARRATOR  
I asked first.

SFX MATTEO ECHO "THIS WAY"

NARRATOR  
Who was that?

SFX DIRT BIKE REVVING SOUNDS ECHO

NARRATOR  
(scared)  
No...

SFX RUNNING

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR  
How far did Old Stars take me? How many roads did we drive down together? I couldn't begin to count 'em. I can still recall the first few, though. Old Stars was as shiny as ever. Not old, then, but brand new. Stars *and* stripes, painted all along the side. It must've been quite a few roads before those stripes faded. Routine maintenance. Change your oil, replace your filters, rotate your tires. Well it was a lot easier, *before*. Back when there were still mechanics everywhere to do the maintainin'. Now they're as few and far between as people have become. Nothing's routine these days, least of all maintenance. But it's all the more important for it. Can't be a passive thing. Never shoulda been, to begin with. It takes effort, and willpower. You gotta open up the hood, get your hands grimy, reach down in and feel the engine, the pistons. You gotta crawl under her and shine a light into the crevices. And if you see something wrong, you've gotta fix it. It's all too easy to keep drivin' along, convincin' yourself that she's brought you this far, she's sturdy, she won't break down on ya. But you don't treat her right, she will. I guarantee you she will.

SFX RECORDER OFF

SFX BRISK FOOTSTEPS

NARRATOR PANTS

NARRATOR

(short of breath, not too bad)  
I'd thought they were all gone, but---

SFX DIRT BIKE REVVING SOUNDS ECHO

NARRATOR

What are they doin' out here? Why?

SFX MATTEO "BRING...HELL.."

SFX RUNNING

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

Was it before the Collapse or after that the stripes faded, leavin' only the stars? They musta been fadin' for a while. A gradual thing, too slow to notice. Like the Collapse. Sure, when it all finally came crumblin' down, it fell quick. Two-hundred fifty years and more to build it, higher and higher, and barely a breath to watch it all come down. But how long is two-hundred fifty years, in the scheme of things? Forests take millenia to grow up, and conflagration can take 'em in the blink of an eye. But that's only the fall, the burnin'. And that don't happen without a cracked foundation and a whole lot of tinder waitin' to go up. And that takes years, maybe not hundreds, but then who's to say? Who's to say when we cracked the foundation of America, set that fault-line into the stone? We were all too busy lookin' up, watchin' it grow. No routine maintenance. All we had to do was open the hood, get our hands grimy, reach down and feel. Slide under her and shine a light. But we didn't want to look. We told ourselves America had brought us this far, she's sturdy. She won't break down on us. She can't. We took her for granted.

SFX RECORDER OFF

SFX RUNNING

SFX PANTING

NARRATOR

(panting)

Not here. Not now. I've come this far. Not like this.

SFX MATTEO ECHO HELL... RUN...

NARRATOR

(panting)

Oh, I'll keep runnin'.

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

I took *you* for granted. Not all at once, but slow, just like the rest of it. Slowly I spent more and more time on the road, withdrew further and deeper into elsewhere. Took longer and longer hauls, came back less and less. I was too afraid to look at it. The decay at the root of our base. Too afraid that it had grown too big, done too much damage. I guess I figured as long as I didn't see it, we could both go on pretending it wasn't there. Oh sure, it wasn't easy to ignore, but... out of sight, out of mind. And there was so much else to see in this country. Why is it so hard? Why do we always wait until it's too late to fix things to admit they're broke? There's nothing wrong with admittin' something needs a little work. Everything needs routine maintenance. I'd give anything to go back, to look at the rot and decay in the face, to fight to preserve what we had. But I'm just talkin' to the wind now. Only... the wind's talkin' back.

SFX RECORDER OFF

SFX DIRT BIKE ECHOES THROUGH CANYONS

SFX MATTEO ECHO HELL... RUN...

NARRATOR PANTS

NARRATOR

Can't... run... no more... Never... should've... run to... begin with...

SFX NARRATOR BREATHES SLOWLY

SFX DIRT BIKE



NARRATOR

So that's it, then. All these years, runnin' away from the inevitable. But it was never chasin' me. It was with me the whole time. Always waitin' in the wings.

SFX DIRT BIKE APPROACHES

SFX DIRT BIKE STOPS

SFX MATTEO WALKS UP

MATTEO

You put up a good chase, you know that?

NARRATOR

Couldn't exactly make it easy for you, could I?

MATTEO

Here man, have some water?

NARRATOR

What? Why?

SFX RECORDER CLICK

NARRATOR (RECORDER PLAYBACK)

"Not sure how I went through the water so quick, but I'm gonna need to go look for some more. I've been keepin'"

SFX RECORDER CLICK

MATTEO

Because I'm trying to help you. Although it would have been easier if you had stopped running.

NARRATOR

But the UTV, that sound. I thought you were one of them. From the Collapse.

MATTEO

What, one of those guys? No, they're long gone. Or at least, I've never come across them. You have to admit, though, in this world a UTV is the perfect vehicle. A lot easier to maneuver than your truck, I'd assume.

NARRATOR

You're probably right, there.

MATTEO

So, can I give you a lift back?

NARRATOR

To Old Stars? She's bust.

MATTEO

Bust is a strong word. So final. She's in bad shape, sure, but she isn't dead yet. I can patch her up. She'll last for a bit, but you'll need to get new parts.

NARRATOR LAUGHS

NARRATOR

So bust, then. There are no new parts.

MATTEO

Sure there are, for the right people. And listening to your tapes, that may be you. There's a Company depot in Colorado Springs. They'll have the bearing.

NARRATOR

Huh. Just have to stroll in and ask 'em, then?

MATTEO LAUGHS

MATTEO

I didn't say it would be easy. But give yourself some credit, you've done some incredible things by the sound of it. I'm sure you'll do a lot more incredible things before your time comes.

NARRATOR

Before my time comes? My own personal collapse.

MATTEO LAUGHS

MATTEO

Okay, old man. Just hop in and let's get out of here. I've already stayed longer than I'd like. It's way too desolate out here.

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

I don't talk much about the Collapse. Figure you know about as much as I do, maybe even more. And there's far more interestin' things on these roads worth talkin' on. It was rough, for a while. I'm sure it was rough for you, too. But the rain lifted, like it always does. And it weren't too long before I found my first olive branch. Feels like all I've been doin' since is extendin' it myself. But when you see that rainbow... What else is there to do? And I don't mind playin' the dove. Beats the mayfly, that's for sure. And it means I have a purpose. And out here, well, that's been enough.

SFX RECORDER OFF

MATTEO

That should do it. It's not the prettiest job, but she should get you to the Company depot. That's gotta be the only place for hundreds of miles where you can properly repair the engine. If you insist on driving east, that is.

NARRATOR

Less of an insistence, more an imperative.

MATTEO

If you say so. So you really do talk like that, huh?

(laughs)

Well I enjoyed your stories, old man. I hope you find whoever it is you're looking for. How far east are you headed, out of curiosity?

NARRATOR

All the way to the Florida Ocean.

MATTEO

You don't know? It isn't an ocean anymore, it's mostly dried up. Florida's back. You'll still have the new strait to deal with, but the Companies built bridges. Or rebuilt them, I guess.

NARRATOR

(awed)

It has?

MATTEO

I think I should be headed off. Drive safe. Anything too crazy and she'll blow.

NARRATOR

Sure thing...

SFX RECORDER ON

NARRATOR

The kid was right. It's not pretty, but she's drivin'. Maybe it isn't too late. Maybe I'll make it to that Company depot, and they'll be able to fix her proper. Surely won't be easy gettin' their help, though. But I gotta try. Gotta face that rot and corruption, shine a light in all the crevices. No, it's not too late for Old Stars, I can't believe that. I might've missed some maintenance, sure, but she can be repaired. I gotta have hope. Time's taken its toll, but I'm still here, ain't I? The stripes may have faded, but the stars remain. Just gotta find the paint, and she'll be as good as new. The lines tying us together can be redrawn. The bonds rebuilt. It's not too late. It isn't.

(pause)

Is it?