

# **STUPID IS BETTER**

A Short Story

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The straight asphalt road glinted under the sun like a dagger's blade. The grass in the ditch beside it swayed in the wind. It pitched a little stronger in one spot. Upon closer inspection, one might notice that there walked an old turtle, slowly making his way through what, for him, was definitely a forest. He had already made it dangerously close to the road. In a very short while he would be upon it. Was he aware of the road's presence?

He pushed the last stalk away and made a final thrust with his cane. Up he went onto the road. He was there.

It startled him.

He did not expect to see such a vast space, much less did he expect the smooth surface of the road.

He felt it with his foot, hesitated for a moment-and set off across the asphalt. He had made but two steps when a faint distant noise flew through the air. Very weak in the beginning but distinct, the noise gradually became louder and louder. Slowly but confidently crossing the road, the old turtle seemed not concerned with the nature of the sound and its origin. He was likely hard of hearing. He leaned on his cane, took another step forward, and...

Who-o-o-sh!

A large automobile flew by within an inch of his face, throwing him to the edge of the road.

The roar of the engine slowly faded behind the sound of the wind. Flipped on his back on the smooth asphalt, the old turtle cautiously poked his head out of his shell and looked around. He stuck out his limbs and felt around the ground for his cane. It wasn't there. The old turtle tried to rock himself back upright, but it did not help much. A moment later, his squeaky voice filled the air with all the swear words he knew, which was very unlikely to help.

The man was seated comfortably in the leather seat of his convertible. The sound of the wind blowing through his hair mingled with that of the tape player. His right arm rested lightly on the steering wheel while his left elbow leaned on the door. He barely felt the road beneath the tires; merely stepping on the gas brought him gliding swiftly at lightning speed. The car was old but in perfect shape; it was wide and red, and its huge engine sucked gas like a thirsty camel.

The man did not enjoy the ride, though. His thoughts wandered far from both the car and the road. He had a purpose, and his mind rushed to it. He was almost there. He could already see it glimmering vaguely in the distance.

The car slowed down and pulled off the road into a small parking lot, stirring up a cloud of dust. The man stepped out of the car and looked around as if evaluating the situation. Everything here was familiar. He had been here before. The bar in front of him was old and decrepit. There was a creaky sign above the entrance, and a thick layer of dust and grime covered the porch. Many footprints led to the door. It looked to be a popular establishment, but no one cared to come out to sweep.

There was something even more peculiar about the surrounding landscape; many vehicles - cars and motorcycles - were parked all around. They looked as if their owners stopped to have a beer at the bar but never came back.

The man shuffled across the porch, shoved the swinging doors, and walked in. He looked around. The bar couldn't have been more deserted. The tables were placed haphazardly, as were the chairs around them, some

knocked to the floor. Two slot machines sat at the far end, one of them completely broken and the other a little banged up. The bar ran along the entire left wall. Dust and cobwebs covered everything, yet strangely enough, everything seemed to have frozen in time. Empty bottles and plates, spilled drinks, unfinished steaks, broken dishes, forks, and knives stuck into the tables, empty kegs, and even a handful of coins left on the counter by a customer. It seemed as if five minutes ago everyone had stood up and walked out together. The man felt as if he knew the reason, but he did not dare to share it even with himself.

Cautiously, he took another step. Though the bar was empty, he progressed softly stepping inwards, as if expecting someone to jump out from under a table any moment. Sweat began beading on his forehead. He reached the middle of the room and was about to take another step when he saw them. It was like a flash as if he was in a pitch dark room and someone had switched on the light for a fraction of a second, just enough for him to see the rough men seated at the tables. Then the bar was empty again. The emptiness startled him. His pupils widened and fear completely overtook him. He made two more quick steps.

Another flash.

This time longer. The rough men were watching him.

They were annoyed.

What could they possibly want from him?

The man was trying to walk forward but was finding it increasingly difficult. Something was trying to infiltrate his consciousness, and he was powerless to stop it. He raised his arms in an attempt to protect himself.

Another flash.

Reality and the haunting magic of the bar had merged in an unimaginable confusion.

The burly men got up from their chairs and moved towards him. He tried to back away, but they were surrounding him from all sides. Their faces were big and hairy. Their wide eyes glittered angrily. He could see long nails on their strong hands. They lashed out at him. Some growled, and others barked. They closed in on him.

He scrambled back in panic. The horror overwhelmed him. He moved frantically backward, pushing the tables and chairs, stumbling and falling and continuing to retreat. They were coming closer and closer.

But why?

What did they want from him? He had merely entered the bar!

The men took another step as his back pressed against the wall. That was it. There was nowhere to go anymore. He slowly slumped to the floor, his jaw quivering as if begging for mercy. The first of the brutes was already over him. From his level, the creature looked enormous and creepy. It swung its paw. The man raised his hands to protect himself but failed, and the nails tore his cheek.

- But why? - he was just about to say and...

Then it all became clear.

A mixture of astonishment and disgust was written all over his face. For a moment, it seemed as if everything had ceased. He got up slowly but confidently. He held two big revolvers in his hands. He wasn't sure if he had grown up or had stepped on a chair by accident, but now the creatures looked small and funny. Now, the anger was in his eyes.

He pulled the triggers.

Thunder and bullets rang out over the crowd. The creatures started falling and writhing about in pain. He was laughing and shooting, falling into euphoria. His body was shaking with pleasure.

The revolver hammers hit empty chambers.

The bar was empty boring, but silence was oppressive.

As if in an imaginary Western, he blew the imaginary barrels and put the pistols in their imaginary holsters. There was a twinkle on his face. Calmly and without hurry, he headed toward the back of the room, toward the not utterly broken slot machine.

The man pulled out a few small coins from his pocket, put one into the slot, and waited for it to clatter inside the machine. Then he took a breath and pulled the lever. The dials spun.

Ting-ting-ting.

He looked closely. He hit three ones. After a pause, he heard a clatter, and a single shiny coin fell into the tray.

The wind was still blowing gently, carrying dust and desert thorns when he left the bar and, with a slow and tired gait, headed for his car. Pride was radiating from every cell of his body.

A moment later, he was already gliding swiftly on the smooth road. No hurry this time. He was calm and content.

At first, the road was straight, and then it began to climb the low rocky hills surrounding the plane. The displacement was insignificant, and the car soon reached a vast plateau. Wasteland spread out far and wide on both sides of the road. Once, long ago, it used to be fertile land. Somewhere in the middle of the plateau, he noticed an old bus stop, relatively speaking, of course, because there were only a few iron posts left sticking out of the ground. But not this attracted his eyes, the body did.

He slowed down and stopped.

He stepped out of the car and looked around. There was only dust and remnants of a bus stop around him. We approached a human body lying on one side.

It was a woman.

Her clothes were old and faded. Her hair was dirty, and so was her face. He squatted beside her and looked closely. Her lips were cracked, and she showed no signs of life. He took the canteen from the car and dropped a few drops on her lips.

There was no response.

He dropped a few more drops and splashed some on her face. He was about to get up when he heard a moan. The woman blinked her eyelids and moved her lips slightly. He helped her sit up. Then he sprinkled her face with water again and let her take a sip. Her eyes were not hazy anymore, and she perked up a little. Shortly afterward, they were already riding in his car. She tried to smile at him, and he smiled back.

They continued along the road that reached the end of the plateau and then climbed up to new sloping hills. It was still desert all around them. There were no plants in sight and no signs of civilization when, after a turn, something different popped up behind the hill.

The large parking lot sprawled on both sides of the road. It was a memory of a long-gone civilization.

The man slowed down. The vehicles in view were old and so rusted and broken that they could not be used for anything anymore. There was nothing strange about them though, and they fit perfectly into the landscape. There

was, however, something else that was out of place, but this puzzled neither the man nor the woman. Scattered among the vehicles were not many and not too old, but severely broken drink vending machines. They varied in size and shape, and their colors were still distinguishable. They certainly had no place in the middle of a car park.

The man drove by slowly and continued on his way without hurry. About a dozen yards from the parking lot there was a bend that ran around a small hill. The man reached the curve and stopped. On the other side of the mountain, a magnificent view unfolded of a vast valley and distant rocky mountains. The road descended to them.

A trail starting from the inner arch of the turn ran between two low hills and disappeared from view. There was also a worn out sign that pointed to the trail.

The man got out of the car and looked at the woman. She attempted a smile. He nodded, then closed the door, and walked down the trail. The trail wasn't long. It meandered behind the hills and ended into a small open space, which once may have been a meadow. There were hills all around.

At one end of the valley stood a single dusty drink vending machine.

The man was overwhelmed by emotion. He swallowed, his eyes gleamed, and his movements became frantic. He went to the vending machine. Reached into his pocket, took out something, and looked at it. It was an old token from the bar that flashed in the sunlight. He carefully dropped it into the slot, waited until the clank stopped, and pressed the only button for a choice of drink.

A few moments passed in which the man did not even blink, nothing happened. Finally, there was a click and aluminum can roll into the chute.

The man anxiously pulled it out and lifted it to his eyes. His face beamed with childlike delight. He turned the can to inspect it all around. He gasped in excitement. He started jumping around in the valley, and his joyous shout spread over the hills.

He ran to the car and triumphantly showed his acquisition to the woman. She smiled at him, this time without any difficulty. Right at that moment, he felt a muzzle touching the back of his neck and heard a hammer click.

The happy expression vanished from his face, and he slowly raised his hands.

The woman urged him to toss her the can with a gesture.

He did nothing.

The muzzle in the back of his neck insistently nudged him.

Finally, he reluctantly tossed the can in the direction of the woman. She deftly caught it and moved to the driver's seat. She swiftly turned on the engine, and the squealing wheels pulled forward.

The man behind him screamed abruptly and ran after the car. He turned out to be a robust fellow with shaggy hair and tattered clothes. He kept running after the car until it soon disappeared behind the turn, and this was the last of him that the man saw. The man remained standing there in the middle of nowhere with his arms raised for no reason. He slowly lowered his hands and looked around. He headed toward the nearest hill and climbed to the top of it. There was a better view from here. He stared down into the valley and soon saw them; the car and the man running after it.

Then, he heard gun shots.

The car stopped.

The man caught up with it and got in.

The car drove off again.

The man kept looking at the departing vehicle. His eyes filled with moisture. He bowed his head and walked down the hill. He slowly reached into his pocket and took out another token - he had taken three in all from the slot machine in the bar - but the sadness remained. He headed toward the drink vending machine.

The sun was setting on the horizon across the valley and bathed it with rays of yellow, purple, and gold. It was an incredible sight. He sat down on the top of the hill and opened the can. Silver-blue splashes spilled from the opening. He sipped from the invigorating elixir and slumped back enjoying the scintillating warmth that spread over his body. At first, his head was dizzy, and then everything became crystal clear. Sadness, boredom, hatred, fatigue - all of his emotions were somewhere far behind. He swam in pure bliss.

Now the sight of the sunset was just magical.

He sipped again.

The End