

Young Writers Award - 2007 runner up

Fuel For Loneliness by Megan McGrath

Heather hadn't always been blonde. It had started in high school when being a beach babe was the height of fashion, despite the distance from the coast, and all the girls lay on their lawns trying to tan, and bleached each other's hair with bottles of peroxide they purchased from the chemist for three dollars ninety. It was easier then, before expectations changed and tans could be purchased from salons where, for a fee, you could be sprayed or baked to the colour of your choice.

Heather had maintained her blondeness since those days. She had never, really, been a brunette. Growing up, she'd had that soft brown hair the colour of rabbit fur. That pleasant non-colour. She had always kept it long, but once she dyed it, she cut it short so it hung blunt and straight around her jaw. She found new confidence in her blondeness.

Heather checked her hair in the rear view mirror as her car idled at the traffic lights. Her roots were fine. Her hair grew slowly, and she was grateful for that. As the lights changed and the traffic moved off, Heather noticed her low fuel light had switched on.

"Shit."

Heather could never remember how far she could travel once the warning light had flicked on. Once she had driven from the bay to the city, the spire of her fuel gauge loitering dangerously in the red zone. She'd made it home without so much as a threatening shudder. She'd make it home, surely. She just had to pass the city, cross the river and follow its curve west.

Heather was particular about where she purchased her petrol. There were only a handful of stations around the city she would pull in to. Despite her favourite being at the end of her street, it had been a while since she had filled up. Things had changed at her petrol station. It began with a missing air hose on a day her tyres needed filling and was followed by the removal of the Endo's bins. Now, she had to drive to the next suburb to donate the jeans that no longer fit her and the heels that were out of season.

Something was amiss, she could feel it. Even as she stood by Bowser Five and found comfort in its familiarity, the curve of the nozzle, the reverberations of the hose and the stability of the trigger, she knew something was just not right.

She drove on through the southern suburbs, watching the kilometres click over on her odometer. It would be foolish, she knew, to push far past fifteen. As the city draw nearer, she saw the afternoon glow reflected on the river. She pulled onto the express way. A clear run to the north. She'd make it home.

Heather woke early, readied herself for work and left her house in time to fuel up her tank. Her car started with a steady hum, she waited for the light to flick on. Just to the end of the street, she told herself. It was mostly downhill anyway. Outside, the morning was still grey; the sun was beginning its slow creep over the skin of the earth. She eased out of her driveway and slowly down the street.

She didn't notice the mesh until she was upon it. A looming wall of black shade cloth strapped around her petrol station. Sacks tied over the pricing board, the doors inside locked and bolted. She crawled by in disbelief, slowing traffic on the main road. It couldn't be closed. Out of business. And yet, the modifications did not seem temporary. Somewhere in the back of her mind a conversation flickered.

She had popped down to buy some milk, walking the short distance in her pyjama bottoms and trainers.

"Are you only working nights now?" she asked the attendant who always remembered her. He'd nodded, adjusted the price of her sale.

"Yeah, it sucks. At this stage, it looks like I'll be here every night until they pull this place down."

She thought he'd meant he wasn't looking for another job, but he had meant it. They were pulling *this place down*. He'd been there every night, and Heather had not stopped in to say goodbye and now he was gone.

For almost two years now, Heather had enjoyed their brief exchanges, while she leaned on the counter, her hip jutting towards the door and any other customers. He spoke to her with an indifference she rarely saw in men. He told her about heavy metal music and engines, two things Heather didn't care the least about, but she had always enjoyed listening.

Heather wondered if she should have been more loyal, more dedicated. Perhaps then he would have stayed. But surely he couldn't know of those minor infidelities. Those brief stops on her way home from the coast. Guilt churned inside her. She should have paid the full price for her milk.

After the realisation had set in, Heather refocused. She needed fuel. And soon. She thought about her route to work, and the other stations she would pass. She'd be forced to use a pump she did not know.

The weeks passed and Heather failed to commit to a new station. She felt as though she had suffered a great loss. She missed Bowser Five and she missed him, too. She was plagued constantly by her fuel light, leaving it until it was absolutely necessary to stop and fill up. Her reluctance marked by the expectant hiss as she unscrewed the cap, the air escaping in a surge of fumes and pressure.

She was between pays, and riding the fuel prices like the stock market. In the Industrial area just south of the city, fuel was the cheapest she'd seen it in weeks. Here she was presented with bowsers with extra buttons and new fuel choices. Ultimate unleaded, eco unleaded, biogas and diesel. When she located the regular unleaded it surged into her tank so ferociously, before she knew it she had clocked thirty dollars.

There were others too. Pumps that clicked and grinded in a way that she found both uncomfortable and embarrassing. And a variety of petrol stations Heather had never dreamed of; the station that only accommodated fuel tanks on the left hand side, the pay-before-you-fill station, the stations that only opened until 4pm, and those that only handled cash. Heather had seen them all in her nomadic quest for somewhere new to satisfy her fuel needs.

She'd encountered her fair share of sleazy attendants too. Men in grubby work shirts who followed her back to her car to comment on her tyres, offer the use of the washroom, or to rub down her windshield. On many occasions, Heather had pulled away feeling somewhat violated.

On Friday afternoon, Heather knocked off early. She was contemplating dinner for one, again, and wandered the stores of a small shopping village just west of the city. She felt like something more personal than a chain grocery store and instead perused the butcher and the green grocer individually, accepting samples and polite conversation. Even small talk was better than the loneliness.

Outside the grocer, Heather stood with an avocado in her hand, testing its firmness gently with her fingers.

"Hey."

Heather turned and saw his round face, his shaved head, the prickle of his beard.

"Hey," she replied, mimicking his greeting. They endured a brief silence.

"Michael," he said finally, offering his name for the first time since their meeting.

Michael. Heather tried his name on while she shifted the Hass from one hand to the other.

"I'm Heather," she said. They shook hands. She was surprised by the smoothness of his skin. His clean fingernails.

"Have you, ah... got time for a-"

"Coffee?" she offered, but wondered then, if he had meant to say 'beer'.

"Yeah. Coffee."

"Sure," she smiled. "I've got time."

They ordered coffees to go from the bakery; hers black, his white with one, and sat nursing their cardboard cups at a table in the noisy food court. Heather supposed she'd never really looked at him. But she was sure she had felt him, as she was not surprised by his husky blue eyes, his straight teeth, the thinness of his lips. Heather wondered if she'd ever found him attractive, if she'd pulled away from the petrol station thinking that he was handsome. Maybe not, but she always drove away smiling, replaying his words in her head.

Heather also knew she had spent a lot of time missing him.

Time passed and their coffee got cold. They did more talking than drinking. She watched his hands while he spoke. As their conversation edged towards closure, Heather thought hard of reasonable excuses to see him again.

"No, I have zero plans for the weekend," she tried to sound blaze about it.

"I think I'm heading north. To the coast, perhaps." He made it sound long term, casual, like it didn't matter how or when he got there.

The words came out before Heather even registered them, "I could give you a lift, if you want".

The sun followed them out of the city. As she drove, Heather snuck looks at Michael while he read the backs of the CD covers she kept stashed in the glove box.

"I'm not sure I'll have anything you like, you can put on whatever you like."

"It's fine," he said. He seemed content to just be moving. She pushed onto the motorway and into traffic. They talked more, but not constantly. She noticed the rips in his jeans.

Just past the pine plantations, Heather pulled onto the shoulder of the motorway. He looked at her curiously.

"Do you mind if we stop for a while?"

"Not at all." He unclipped his seatbelt. Heather could drive for hours with no breaks, but she needed the sounds outside the car. She needed to stop and be sure this was real.

The sun had all but vanished and they were left in the grey and yellow glow that preceded the night. Heather leant against the bonnet. Michael offered her a cigarette. When she declined, he put the pack away without lighting one for himself. There was silence and the whoosh of cars, the steady tick tick of her hazard lights.

She imagined him lifting her onto the bonnet with those big, clean hands, maneuvering his body between her legs. She thought of his whiskers grazing her neck, the oily smell of him. She wanted him to pull her knickers aside and slide himself into her. The heat of the engine warming her ass while he fucked her, slowly, in full view of the traffic.

Instead, she leant a little closer to him, their shoulders almost touching.

She asked, "What are you going to do next?" meaning the next five minutes, and for ever.

"I'm not sure. Something else, probably." He turned his head and caught her looking at him.

"I think I missed you," she said.

"Mmm, me too." He nodded, smiling, and retrieved the cigarettes once more from his pocket.