

DESPERATION

Stephen King



"Oh! Oh, Jesus! Gross!"

"What, Mary, what?"

"Didn't you see it?"

"See what?"

She looked at him, and in the harsh desert sunlight he saw that a lot of the color had gone out of her face, leaving just the marks of sunburn on her cheeks and across her brow, where not even a strong sunblock cream would entirely protect her. She was very fair and burned easily.

"On that sign. That speed-limit sign."

"What about it?"

"There was a dead cat on it, Peter! Nailed there or glued there or some damned thing." He hit the brake pedal. She grabbed his shoulder at once. "Don't you even think about going back."

"But--"

"But what? Did you want to take a picture of it? No way, Jose. If I have to look at that again, I'll throw up."

"Was it a white cat?" He could see the back of a sign in the rearview mirror--the speed-limit sign she was talking about, presumably--but that was all. And when they passed it, he had been looking off in the other direction, at some birds flying toward the nearest wedge of mountains. Strictly attending to the highway was not something one had to do every second out here; Nevada called its stretch of U.S. 50 "The Loneliest Highway in America," and in Peter Jackson's opinion, it lived up to its billing. Of course he was a New York boy, and he supposed might be

suffering a cumulative case of the creeps. Desert agoraphobia, Ballroom Syndrome, something like that.

"No, it was a tiger-stripe," she said. "What difference does it make?"

"I thought maybe Satanists in the desert," he said. "This place is supposed to be filled with weirdos, isn't that what Marielle said?"

"'Intense' was the word she used," Mary said.

"'Central Nevada's full of intense people.' Quote-unquote. Gary said pretty much the same. But since we haven't seen anybody since we crossed the California state line--"

"Well, in Fallon--"

"Pit-stops don't count," she said. "Although even there, the people . . ." She gave him a funny, helpless look that he didn't see often in her face these days, although it had been common enough in the months following her miscarriage. "Why are they here, Pete? I mean, I can understand Vegas and Reno . . . even Winnemucca and Wendover . . ."

"The people who come from Utah to gamble there call Wendover Bend Over," Peter said, grinning.

"Gary told me that."

She ignored him. "But the rest of the state . . . the people who are here, why do they come and why do they stay? I know I was born and raised in New York, so probably I can't understand, but--"

"You're sure that wasn't a white cat? Or a black one?" He glanced back into the rearview, but at just under seventy miles an hour, the speed-limit sign had already faded into the mottled background of sand, mesquite, and dull brown foothills. There was finally another vehicle behind them, though; he could see a hot sunstar reflection pricking off its windshield. Maybe a mile back. Maybe two.