

Ghost

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South of Piqua there's a rest stop. One building has the restrooms, another has the vending machines, and behind them, behind the lot for cars and vans, down a small slope is a picnic grove. Two dozen picnic tables are dotted across the area, some shaded by maples with canopies high enough to not be in the way. Near half of them are charcoal grills with smaller tables thoughtfully placed next to them as a set-up and preparation area. The rest stop a hundred miles back, near Bowling Green, doesn't have the grills. A dog-walking path winds its way through the grove, starting and ending back at the parking lot.

When I pulled into the rest stop there were only three other cars in the lot. The area where the trucks parking was mostly empty. I went in to the building where the bathrooms were. The men's was closed for cleaning. *That's okay*, I thought. *I'm only twenty miles from my brother's house. I can get that far, and I don't need it that badly.* But it was a fine day and the drive had been a long one, so I crossed the parking lot and walked through the grove.

The sound of the freeway faded as I descended the slope. A small wind came through the trees as I idly wandered over to a grill. It was empty, no remains of a stray cigarette butt let alone ashes from a cookout long over to be found. Not too far away was a trash can: empty. I drifted over to another grill which had coals in it that didn't look like they'd even been lit. Did the person put them there and then—what, realize they'd forgotten some crucial ingredient, like the hamburger? The accompanying trash can wasn't quite empty, some

shredded and torn papers covering the bottom of the can, but the amount of ants crawling over them told me they'd been there for some time.

I looked around me in the grove then and realized that I was probably it for the day, the only person that would wander down here and see what there was to see. Long past were the days when families passing through would pull off and stop here, occupying one of the picnic tables instead of finding the nearest fast food place. Cold cuts would have been packed, chips and drinks acquired before getting on the freeway that morning or, if someone was feeling adventurous, a grill would be used, the children throwing a Frisbee while waiting for the coals to be ready. Instead of a ten-minute restroom break, families would be at these places for an hour or more, stopping and resting as the name suggested.

I climbed back up the hill to the parking lot. Two of the cars had gone. Leaning against the trunk of the third, a teenage girl applied her thumbs to her cellphone without once looking up at what was across the parking lot from her. I looked again at the picnic grove. From above it looked even lonelier. I tried to envision what it would have looked like, fully in use, families at all of the picnic tables, but the sound of the freeway kept my mind from fleshing out this fantasy. I could see, though, the one grill where I'd found the unlit coals, and envisioned myself there being the one to put this place to the use it was designed for, stopping here on my next trip through with a bag of coals, a roll of tin foil, and a pound of ground chuck. Then people would come and see what I was doing, and maybe remember, for a while, to just stop. The image faded then, the ghost of a future rest stop disappeared, and I too turned my back and walked away. ▣