

M I C H A E L M O R T E N S O N

Three Minutes

The Conoco gas station was deserted when I rolled up. Sixteen fully-functioning, state-certified gas pumps and no one was interested, poor things. Surely, I couldn't be the only one traveling along this desert stretch of I-15 with a thirsty car.

I glanced across the street to the big, red-and-white numbers on the Shell sign: \$2.69 a gallon. Same exact price as the Conoco. No economic excuse for this empty gas station. I eased the car up to the nearest pump and the brakes let out an inglorious screeching, like a cheese grater on a chalkboard. I got out of the car and stretched. Oh, the glory of arching my back and reaching my arms to the sky!

Fishing my squashed wallet from my pocket, I inserted a card into the machine. The gas pump gave an obstinate beep and spit the card back out. Its display flickered dimly, then went blank. Maybe it hadn't read my card right. I re-inserted the card, only for the machine to spit it right back out again like a two-year-old with Gerber peas. I guess there are those that just can't stomach Wells Fargo.

I gave the keypad a couple of jabs, hoping—though not really expecting—that I might prod some sensibility into the

machine. *Meep . . . meep . . . meep . . .* went the machine. No luck. I shoved my wallet back into my pocket. Fine. Be that way.

I drove the car around to another pump. Thank goodness this gas station was empty.

As I pumped the car full of gas at \$2.69 a gallon, a couple cars got off the freeway and joined me at the pumps. Unlike me, none of them had the fair fortune to pick the defective pump.

The nozzle chugged to a stop \$31 later and I returned it to its holster. The machine gave a contented beep and dutifully printed out my slick black-and-white receipt. At least this pump had some manners.

I got back into the car and heard my dad's voice in my head. Time to pray! Everybody, fold your arms! I mentally told my dad to hush up, that I was my own person. Plus, I had already said a prayer when I set out to drive home from college for the long weekend.

Close your eyes!

Oh brother, I thought. Fine. I looked around to make sure nobody was watching and bowed my head.

My car prayers—unlike my bedtime ones—are always mental prayers. As a rule, I try to make them quick, because otherwise I end up inadvertently telling God how I hope to drive safely through the winding canyon gorge ahead and how hungry I am and wondering whether the Wendy's by my house will be open when I get home and, if it isn't, how I should probably try for Taco Bell because the ads for the new tacos look delicious. And then I remember that I am praying, so I do some apologizing in my prayer and close with an amen and wonder if the prayer was really worth it. Which is exactly what happened this time. I'd like to think that even the taco prayers are worthwhile, but I'm not certain.

According to the dashboard clock, the prayer had been three minutes long. Three minutes of awkwardness with God. I

imagined Him sitting in front of a heavenly Skype screen absently stroking His beard and watching as He waited for His distracted kid with spiritual ADD to pull himself together. Awkward.

I turned the key in the ignition and the engine grumbled to life. Maybe God shouldn't answer every child's prayer; maybe He should only answer the sincere and earnest ones. It might serve me right and teach me a lesson in prayer etiquette, too.

The air conditioning whirred back into activity with a heaviness that told me the car was once again happy and full. I pulled out of the gas station and merged onto I-15. I punched the stereo button for music and cranked up the volume.

Outside my window, telephone poles and scraggly desert brush rushed past. The sky blazed with its last hour of blue before the warmer tones of sunset set in. I hummed along with the music as I passed the Arizona state sign. Welcome to the Grand Canyon State! I leaned on the accelerator.

Rounding the top of a ridge, I began the dreaded descent toward the entrance to the gorge. I dislike driving in the gorge for many reasons. I dislike the twisting, the sheer walls leaning in to crush unwary vehicles, the signs warning about falling rocks (something I would never know to worry about without the signs), and the semitrucks hurtling at well over the speed limit scarcely a hand's width beyond my sideview mirrors. Add to this the maddeningly apparent leisure and ambivalence of other drivers on the road, and it becomes clear why I don't love the gorge.

Unexpectedly, the car in front of me swerved and slammed on the breaks. I stomped on my breaks and there was a whole chorus of cheese graters on chalkboards. I put out a hand to keep my backpack in the passenger seat. The car came to a stop and rocked back on its heels, barely two feet behind the next car. I let out a breath I didn't realize I had been holding and saw a long trail of taillights curving down the freeway. Just my luck. Traffic.

I pulled the emergency break and put the car in park. What a lovely day to turn I-15 into a ribbon of parking lot across the desert. I pulled my phone out of the glove compartment to place a quick phone call.

“Hey, Dad. You know how I said I was going to be home around seven?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, it looks like I’m gonna be later. I’m in standstill traffic in Arizona.”

“Okay.”

“Any advice?”

“Patience is a virtue.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“And keep an eye on the engine temperature gauge. If the engine gets too hot, it could explode. We’ll keep you in our prayers.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

I let the phone fall into my lap. Exploding cars. Lovely thought. Thanks, Dad.

Who knew how long I would be here? I pulled the lever under my seat to lean it back as far as it would go and kicked off my flip flops. I rubbed the rough ridges of the brake pedal with my toes. The suede ceiling of the car stared back at me and I wondered what to do next.

I eyed the car in front of me. It had a happy stick figure family in sticker decals on its back window and a California license plate that said *MA AI*. On a whim, I flipped to the Google translate app on my phone. I set it to “detect language” and typed in *MA AI*. The phone thought for a minute. The language, it said, was Romanian: *You have me*.

I smiled wryly. Thanks, Phone; it’s good to know that in times like this, I have you. Then my phone gave a warning vibrate, dimmed, and fell dead silent. I shook my head. So much for that. To the people in the car ahead of me, I’m sure the

phrase meant something more. I suppose if all else failed, I did have the car in front of me and all the other cars stuck on the road. We weren't alone, and there was comfort in that. *You have me.* If we got stranded, we could all pull the seats out of our cars at night and make a circle in the desert and roast snack crackers and drink flat soda around a gasoline-and-desert-brush bonfire.

I watched as two beat-up semitrucks trundled down the onramp to my right. Welcome to the party, guys. Maybe one of the drivers spoke Romanian. Then they could make friends with the people in front of me at our desert bonfire later. But somehow, I doubted it.

A siren throbbed in the distance. Soon an ambulance barreled past using the shoulder lane. A ball of foreboding sank through me and into the seat. Somewhere out there in the winding canyon, someone was in real trouble. No fantasy of heroes, film scores, and slow-motion footage, but an actual reality of scorching asphalt and injury. I sent off a quick mental prayer to protect and preserve the lives of those in danger, according to the will of God.

Someone, somewhere out there, was in dire need of a miracle.

I wondered if the people in front of me said a prayer too, perhaps in Romanian. It didn't really matter which language they used because God's translate app was better than mine. He would get the message. He would get the message.

I wonder sometimes whether wishing counts as praying. When you blow out candles on your birthday and your dad says "Make a wish!" and you honestly pause to consider what you want most for the next year, does that count as prayer? You focus on the wish, you see it in your mind's eye, and then you send it off with a puff of air and curls of smoke. Does God see wishes like He sees prayer? Does He pick up pennies from wishing wells? Does He hold them, one by one, between His thumb and forefinger and rub them thoughtfully, remembering the

moment they were cast into freedom trailing wish-thoughts behind them? I would like to think that God does answer our prayers and our sincere wishes, that He understands desire as spoken in the untranslatable language of the heart.

People began to open doors and get out of cars to peer anxiously after the receding lights of the ambulance. Most shielded their eyes from the sun and squinted down the road before returning to their cars.

But not everyone returned to their cars. I watched one man in my rearview mirror, who opened the back door of his sedan to let out three slobbering dogs. He walked with them down the shoulder of the road and they drooled and sniffed at the roadside rocks and scrub, oblivious and at ease.

Ahead of me in the other lane, two little girls with amber pigtails opened the back window of their truck and, giggling, whipped out pink smartphones to video the man and his dogs. When they lost interest in the man, they turned to follow a gentleman in a paddy cap who tottered over to speak loudly to a purple-haired woman in a nearby car. He had a red plastic cup in each hand and offered her one. She declined and he returned to lean against his own vehicle and sip intermittently from both cups.

Not everyone was content to sit in their car or walk their dogs. A large SUV pulled off the road impatiently to churn a dusty path to freedom. Soon, the SUV melted into the speedy stream of cars headed away from the gorge. Another smaller SUV followed suit, disappearing across the desert and into the freeway beyond. Part of me wanted to follow them. Part of me knew it wouldn't do me any good.

Patience is a virtue, said the voice in my head who likes to quote my dad.

Except when it's not, I thought back. At some point you have to do *something* because waiting won't work. Sometimes patience isn't a virtue: it's a vulture circling overhead waiting

for you to die while you're being patient. Luckily, I hadn't seen a vulture all day, just clear skies.

I wonder sometimes whether praying really counts as doing something. I think there are whole hosts of people who pray prayers, even taco prayers, which God would probably be willing to answer, if they would just bother to get up and drive the car five minutes. For these people, prayer is empty air and unfulfilled desire. Wishful thinking without honestly wishing. But there are also those times when prayer is really all you can do. When, for example, you are stranded on a freeway or when your phone dies. Then prayer is enough. Or at least I hope it is. It's really hard to know until after the fact, when you can look back and see how it all played out.

I watched the sun as it dipped down toward the jagged ridge of the mountains, spreading tendrils of orange, pink, and purple across the blue sky. The mountains held a sort of sweet, stark beauty, unashamed of their fissures and sharp edges. Below it all, the hardy plants of the desert banded together, a brittle field across the valley floor and into the winding canyon. The view practically hummed with life.

My friend, a graphic designer, once said that only God could have created a desert sunset.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because only God can mix colors like purple, pink, blue, orange, and brown together and have it not end in catastrophic disaster."

Maybe that's what it is to be God: to see it all and know how it all fits together. Mixing colors. People. Wishes. Prayers.

I watched the sun sink gradually into the top of the mountain and flare a vibrant red. The beauty of it fulfilled a desire I didn't know I had somewhere deep in my soul. I felt overwhelming gratitude. Who cared if I made it home in time for Wendy's? I wouldn't miss the gift of a sunset like this for a whole week of spontaneous traffic jams.

Then I noticed *MA AI* was moving. Soon all the cars began inching forward. We crept onwards until we were once again rolling slowly down the freeway. The road guided us into the mouth of the gorge between the steep canyon walls and past a beware-of-falling-rocks sign. We rounded a bend and came to a stretch of road lined with orange cones. They appeared oddly festive, like squat, misplaced birthday candles.

Beyond the cones near a steep embankment, a crowd of firefighters in yellow suits were hosing down the charred metal skeleton of a semitruck. The frame was held in place by a bulldozer. I spotted the cab of the truck twenty yards down the road lying on its side. Not so festive. The cab windshield had melted away, and you could still see the metal frame of the driver's chair, bent and deformed, smoking gently.

We rolled by, a solemn procession of onlookers, terrified to see and terrified not to see. First, the truck with the two girls and their phones. Next, the two semis, passing their fallen brother. Welcome to the party, guys. Then *MA AI*. Then me. And lastly the man with three dogs and the gentleman with the drinks. *You have me*. The words returned to my head.

Who has whom? Did anyone survive? The ambulance was gone. Had the prayers worked? Or was this painful reality? I strained to see out my rearview mirror, but the wreck receded too quickly, like a ship swallowed under lapping waves. Soon all had faded from sight, mixing with the twilight hues of the desert. Mixing.

Why do horrible things happen to some people and not others? Is life as simple as a game of roulette between a smoking chassis and a painted sunset? It could have been me, or the little girls, or the gentleman with the cups on the side of the road back there. It could have been any of us.

The silence didn't correct me. For several minutes I drove on. The cars around me became unfamiliar and the valley stretched out flat and wide before me.

I have you. The little voice in my mind surprised me.

I answered your prayer, you know. It was answered before you even said it. I saved your life with that broken gas pump and your prayer. Three minutes and I saved your life.

The voice paused to let the words sink in.

I have you and you have me.

Three minutes.

MA AI.

When I got home I checked the news, but couldn't find any details on the crash. I still don't know what happened or whether anyone survived. What I did know—still know—is that catastrophe could have hit any of us. It could have, but it didn't. Prayer saved my life, but it wasn't my prayer that did the saving; God was in charge of the mixing.

I barely felt time pass as I drove the rest of the way home through the desert evening, wondering about those three minutes, grateful to be alive.

I didn't get home in time for Wendy's, but Taco Bell was still open. *You have me.*

