

# I Pump Gas

By Johnny Zephyr

I anticipate the rush when a car comes in. I like the vapors enveloping my face when I open the gas tank. I like to hear the sharp click when the cap is opened. I like the pliant grey membrane that folds in to accept the nozzle.

Pumping gas soothes me, it moves me. Be mine Benzine. I used to have a girlfriend called Beatrice. Be mine Beatrice. I called her Beat. I never beat her. She evaporated one day. I flooded here. I could have said she beat it. But I didn't. Restraint is my middle name.

The summer here is relentless. The sun flays your body. It would be happy if you just curled up and let your body fluids evaporate. You can feel the heat fighting its way up through your feet and torso from the bare dusty ground as if it was trying to complete a circuit with the sun over your head to wipe you off the planet. That's hot.

Mostly it's out-of-staters who call. The locals prefer the Exxon station on route 9. I don't blame them. I don't like the locals and the feeling is mutual. It's probably because a few years back the Hunter brothers drove off in their gleaming new Bronco without paying. I had just taken over the gas station. A distant relative of my father's left it to me, the only useful thing my father did. My father was dead by then. I did that. Bye bye daddy, bye bye daddy, be dead, I mean good. That's Chuck Berry. Sorta. Daddy had it coming.

So had the Hunters. As they drove over the plain dirt forecourt towards the highway, acrid dust cascading into the air, laughing at their prank, I pulled a shotgun from behind the door and fired. The tires were blown to pieces, unlike the Hunter brothers. They got out and ran. They weren't laughing. It was a gas, gas, gas.

The deputy sheriff called out the next day and gave me a warning. This is a fairly wild county so I was lucky. I could have been up for willful damage, endangering hillbillies, etc... But a caution was all I got. It was reckless on my part. I had a Glock nearby in case the sheriff was going to arrest me, but he didn't. I wasn't sure what I would have done. Maybe nothing. Maybe something. He was an OK guy. His eyes were as blue as the high Texas skies above us. He said be careful. I promised to be a good boy. Bye bye sheriff, bye bye sheriff, I'll be good.

A tow truck arrived with him to take the Bronco away. I had siphoned off all the gas and stolen the spare tire and the tool box. I concealed a dead possum deep under the chassis where it couldn't be extracted easily. I soldered a metal casing around the moldering remains with enough vents for gases to escape. Soon they would be driving around in a stinkmobile. I also added sugar to the gas tank which would cause problems once they filled her up at the streamlined self-service Exxon station on Route 9. That's how it goes sometimes. They didn't come back.

I was fixing the car of a couple from upstate New York. They drove in the day before with steam and oil squirting onto the windshield. They could barely see out through the smeared windows. I drove them into town so they could stay in civilization while I worked on the car. I had a few rooms around back to rent but they didn't like them. They are clean but spartan. A bit like myself. He was OK and I felt bad for him. His wife kept saying – this won't do, this won't do, it's the wilderness. I know that.

When a battered black Continental Town Car drove up, I ambled out from the compressed heat inside the garage. You don't see many of those around here, I said to the driver who had stepped out. He didn't say anything. He spat on the ground. He was about five feet five and skinny.

Jesus what a dump, he said.

The passenger laughed.

The driver said: Fill it up there.

I lifted the hose from its seat and opened the cap. The aromatic odor of gasoline reached me.

The passenger got out and stretched his legs.

You got a John, or do I just piss in the forecourt of this first class establishment?

The driver laughed.

It's around back, I said.

OK – he walked to the side of the station as I directed.

He spat into the withered grass. He was heavily built, 6-3 or 6-4, walked with a limp and had dead eyes. I'd seen it all before.

You got any beers or anything, the driver asked.

Yeah – inside.

OK.

He walked away from the car and headed towards the store.

I was almost finished when I saw a child lying on the back seat, his eyes empty. He was lying under a blanket and there was salt caked on his eyes from tears, bruises on his face. I opened the door and put my hand to see if he was OK. He jerked away and the blanket fell. I saw an archipelago of bruises tattooed on his pale white back and stomach.

Hey fucker, what're you doing, the driver shouted as he ran from the store carrying a six pack.

He dropped it on the iron-hard ground. Bottles broke and beer fizzed and frothed under the high summer sun. He was pulling a gun from his waist band.

I backed away from the door and gently closed it.

None of my business, I said.

You got that right – he pushed the gun into my cheek beneath my eye. That's my kid – he's a walking accident.

If he's your kid that's fine.

The passenger came back from the bathroom – what the fuck's going on?

He had the back door open.

YOU were supposed to stay with the car, he said.

I was just thirsty.

I was just thirsty, I was just thirsty – you fuckin baby.

I have zero interest in your activities. I'm trying to keep a low profile. That's why I'm in the middle of nowhere. I don't need the cops around here. Again.

They were considering this.

You can even have the gas for free.

This guy is a moron the driver said pointing at me – he won't say a word.

Fuck, I don't like it the passenger said.

As they discussed it, the driver eased the gun away from my cheekbone.

I hit him with the metallic nozzle of the gas hose. He fell like a bag of cement. The gun fell from his hand. I completed the arc with the hose and hit the passenger. It was a glancing blow off his temple but enough to knock him down and into unconsciousness.

When they came to they were seated in the car. I had moved it out back just in case anyone called by. I sat on the back porch in the minimal shade watching them. I stood up and walked towards them. When I was close, I picked up a gas hose I used around back for my own car.

Will I fill it up lads?

They started to panic.

I pushed the nozzle in through a small gap I had left at the top of the window.

They tried to escape but it was hard. I had the doors soldered shut.

I released the gas and it spurting in on top of them. They choked and scrambled and pleaded. I couldn't smell fear because the gas overpowered it.

They tried to kick the windows out but they were tied together. So they got in each other's way. So they couldn't organize it. So there you go.

I pulled the hose out and watched them for a while. They watched back. Their hair dripped gasoline. I poured some gas on the hood and bonnet and withdrew a few feet leaving a trail of gas on the dirt. I took up the acetylene torch and lit it.

I handed it to the boy. I helped him hold it and he raised it and pointed it at the car. I held his hand and we lowered it at the puddle of gas shining in the sunlight. When it was steady, I increased the intensity of the flame. It flew towards the gas trying to complete another circuit. Trying to fill a vacuum. Just doing it's job. Just like me.

I sent the boy inside. Don't forget my middle name.

A bright orange flame tore through the driver and the passenger and the Lincoln Town Car. I sat there for a long time, till the night came and the air cooled and the stars came out.

*Johnny Zephyr is a writer from Texas where it's fucking hot. And strange. Where people go up in flames. Sometimes.*

*He is addicted to gasoline vapors from the time he was a kid pumping gas in a small town filling station. After 15 minutes he couldn't remember his name or give change accurately so there was a long line of customers anytime the locals found out he was on duty. Plus the gas station owner didn't keep accurate accounts and didn't notice. Plus Johnny only worked one night a week which limited the damage. He graduated to high octane fuels later. He is also addicted to Ross Macdonald, Jim Thompson, Richard Stark and James Ellroy.*