

Tales from the Flashback:  
“Thunder Lizard Road”  
by  
Wayne Kyle Spitzer



## A Short Story

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By the time they'd passed Khitomer Butte and were well on their way to Pine Stump Junction, the two beers he'd had at the motel were a distant memory, much less the mescaline from the previous day—at least Sammi thought so until he saw the Tyrannosaurus Rex attacking the big, green tractor combine.

And yet was it the mescaline? Nothing in his field of vision was moving or wiggling, there were no multicolored lines, the sense of euphoria had long since vanished along with the feeling that every cell in his body were somehow orgasming; no, everything seemed perfectly normal to him, from the rumbling of the Harley to the farmland passing by. And yet, there *was* a tyrannosaur. He could see it just as clear as day through his marginally tinted goggles—even as the thing gnawed upon the combine's enclosed cab like a dog with a chew toy, holding the tractor fast beneath its tri-clawed foot as the grain stalks waved in the wind and the sun dipped below the horizon. *Just keep riding*, he told himself. *At least until the next rest stop. It's some kind of after-effect—hadn't Annie's friend said not to drive for at least 24 hours? Just keep riding ...*

*That's right*, came a voice, wan, disinterested, *her* voice, following him still, as it had followed him since the divorce and the buying of the winning Lotto ticket, as it had followed him since meeting Annie and across the entire country ... *just keep riding. After all, that's what you're good for, Sammi. Riding and driving away.*

"Wow," said Annie, her arms tightening around his waist. "Are you feeling it too?"

He focused on a dark shape hovering just above the wheat—several dark shapes—like hummingbirds, but *big*. Something glinted blue-black in the sun. "What do you mean?"

"The mescaline ... I'm still tripping, baby." Her inner thighs constricted against his hips and he thought of the fantastic shag they'd shared in California—while standing doggie-style amidst the Vasquez Rocks, the famed location of so many westerns—and found the fact that she was hallucinating also reassuring, even if it did mean they were barreling down the Interstate at 74 mph while still under the influence. "Yeah. Me too. I'm going to pull over at the next rest stop until it passes."

"DJ is expecting us at five. And it isn't polite to keep the head of a motorcycle gang waiting. They're my friends, Sammi. This is important to me."

"God forbid, we miss a party. We'll make it."

“Not if we take too long at the rest stop ... Jesus, I’m seeing dinosaurs back here. What the hell did Jackie give us?”

Her voice had dropped a couple octaves and the wind and engine noise were making it difficult to hear her. *Not gave*, he thought, a little resentfully. *Sold. And the money’s starting to run out.* “Say again?”

“Dude, I’m literally seeing dinosaurs. There’s, like, a T-Rex back there. Trying to eat a tractor.” She laughed.

He turned and looked over his shoulder, saw the tyrannosaur brushing its massive head against the cab of the combine, attempting to roll it over. *There’s no way we can be seeing the same thing. There’s just no way except—*

“Baby ...!”

He spun around in time to see a blue-black *thing*, an insect, a *dragonfly*, which was at least as long as his forearm, hovering directly in their path—before it smashed against the windshield like a rock and splattered like a cantaloupe, hurling watery green blood and guts everywhere, some of which landed in Sammi’s mouth. And then they were careening out of control in the general direction of the gravel shoulder, and while he didn’t experience anything so dramatic as his life flashing before him, he did revisit, in a kind of time-out from time itself, the months since he’d received the Lotto payout and met Annie—a fast-living spit-fire who was 29 to his 39 and whom he had nothing in common with beyond how well they got on sexually—and recognized in himself an increasing dissatisfaction with, well, all of it—the gambling, the drugs, the sex—everything. But then the time-out was over and they were laying on their side near the edge of the road—yet still in it—as the 18-wheeler bore down upon them, close enough so that Sammi could see the driver’s face, and thus knew the driver had noticed them too late.

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THERE WAS A SINGLE sharp drum beat followed by a fanfare of trumpets—which always reminded Carina of the opening credits to that old show, *The Love Boat*—as the huge spiral waterslide was activated (marking the beginning of the YMCA’s After-school All-swim), and she launched herself into the sluice.

The loudspeakers blared: *Young man, there's no need to feel down / I said, young man, pick yourself off the ground ...*

And then she was sliding and careening down, a little faster than she would have liked, wondering if she would crash headlong into Alex before she even reached the bottom—a thought that was dispelled as she plunged into the four feet of water at the base of the slide ... and surfaced, gasping and disoriented.

“Boo,” said Alex, startling her from behind, and laughed.

“Oh ... you!” she said, and splashed water at him.

He splashed her back, his eyes dancing mischievously behind his goggles, before diving beneath the surface and grabbing her ankles—something he’d been doing with annoying regularity lately, ever since her mother had sewn the quilted patch into the crotch of her swimsuit. Indeed, his behavior in general, the behavior of all the boys in the Water Crew, which was what they called their after-school swimming gang, had become annoying: it was as though time stood still for them; they all still acted as though they were in 6<sup>th</sup> grade and had not moved onto junior high school at all.

She kicked him away and moved toward the edge of the pool, feeling hungry and eager to join the others in the rec room, but he only surfaced and pleaded with her to go down the slide with him one more time.

“Once more,” she said, exasperated. “Then I’m out, seriously. I’m hungry.”

She couldn’t help but to think, as they climbed the stairs to the top: *How many times can you splash down the same stupid slide before it finally loses its appeal?*

*I don’t know*, she asked herself, as Alex launched himself into the jet stream. *How many times can your mother fall in love with the same type of guy?*

She sat down on the slide carefully and eased herself off. *The type of guy who is all presents and attention at first but then disappears like the wind?*

She blew down the slide, rocking between the berms alarmingly in spite of her attempt to take it slow, and had a sudden vision of a great white shark waiting for her at the bottom—its spiny-toothed maw opened wide as a manhole, its pink palate gleaming. Then she exploded out the slide and was beneath the water again—waving her arms and legs for balance desperately—and when she surfaced, fully expecting Alex to pounce upon her immediately, she was surprised to find him nowhere in sight.

And that was odd, considering she'd gone immediately after him. She scanned the water around her even as the late afternoon sun, which had been pouring in through the windows, seemed to disappear completely. She peered outside and saw clouds stacking up in what had been a pure azure dome. *Ah, she thought, it's dipped behind a cloud. It'll be back, unlike your long line of stepdads.*

That's when she noticed the blood beginning to spread in the water all around her ... and was gripped with terror.

*Omigod.*

*Omigod, just ... no.*

And such was her terror and embarrassment at starting her first period in public that she nearly fainted—but instead backed toward the edge of the pool, groping for the concrete while thinking, *How could there be so much? How could all that possibly be coming from me?*

Her fingers touched a face—Alex, of course; he'd been under the water after all—*Omigod, omigod, what would he say? Would he tell the others? Would it be all over school the very next day?*

And that's when she realized his head was no longer connected to his body. That it had been completely severed and was bobbing in the intake filter. And then there were screams—others as well as her own—and she turned in time to see someone yanked below the surface not twenty feet away, as well as a fin, black as an orca's, which rolled like a log in the deep end of the pool. And she screamed until her voice went raw even as she started to climb from the water—until she saw the velociraptor crouched on the wet concrete with its eyes rolled back in its skull (Mr. Stiller said that predators did that right before striking, to protect their eyes) and its sickle-clawed toes tapping, and knew there would be no escape for her.

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LUCAS TURNED HIS OPEN textbook vertical long enough to flip the page of his comic book, then lay the math-text horizontal and continued reading *Spiderman*. He'd been held after school for not paying attention, yet there he was, lost in his own thoughts, not understanding anything the teacher was saying and already thinking of the excuses he could give his mother as to why he was so late getting home. *It was bullies*, he decided. Nevermind that most his bullies



were right there in the same room, doing penance just as he was. And never-mind that his mother had heard it all before, or that, at this rate, he almost certainly wouldn't be graduating 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The ugly truth was that the numbers on the chalkboard—having failed to engage his imagination—were as good as invisible to him. And so he read *Spiderman*, which had color and texture, danger, stakes—until the sun passed behind a cloud and directed his attention through the louvered windows: where he saw a flock of seagulls erupt from the playground, beyond which and across the street lay the YMCA, and realized, or perhaps only imagined, that they had scattered before a stampeding triceratops, which was itself being pursued by a Tyrannosaurus rex, which he watched until the creature had disappeared around the edge of the building.

But indeed, he had not imagined it, for some of the other children gasped and rose from their seats, rushing toward the windows even as Mr. Headley shouted at them bewilderedly; at which moment there was screaming in the hallway and Lucas saw the teacher freeze and turn white as a ghost—before fumbling beneath his suitcoat and pulling forth a pistol.

"Everyone get on the floor, now," he shouted, sprinting for the open door faster than Lucas would have thought him capable, while yelling at the kids running down the hall to get into the room and take cover, although few heeded him in their blind panic. He peered around the jamb as someone or something barked in the corridor—then pulled a student into the room by her arm and shut the door quickly.

He was standing with his back pressed against it, breathing heavily, gripping the gun in both hands, when Sally Meyers asked, "Who is it, Mr. Headley? Is it ... an 'active shooter?'"

His breath came and went in ragged gasps. "I—I don't know what's going on, honey. I ... just saw a blur. Just ... stay put."

The big IBM clock on the wall ticked as an eerie silence set in, and nobody moved. At last Mr. Headley turned to face the door and gripped the handle.

"Don't, Mr. Headley, please," said Sally.

"Yeah, let's wait for help," said Thomas.

Mr. Headley eased the door open just enough to peek through, and Lucas tensed ... but breathed a huge sigh of relief when the teacher turned to face them

and said, "I can't see much, but I think it's clear. Everyone stay put. I'm going to try to—"

And something grabbed him by his ankles—a pair of clawed hands—and yanked, dropping him to the floor on his stomach and causing him to release his grip on the pistol. Then he was being lifted, high enough so that his head struck the top of the doorframe, and nearly everyone, including Lucas, went rushing to help him. But they couldn't even reach him, much less help, as he gripped the jamb desperately and began to scream, until finally he was torn away completely, although not before grabbing the door handle in a final act of heroism and pulling the entryway shut.

And then there was only the sound, the sounds, of something being eaten or otherwise torn apart—moist sounds, cracking sounds—as a dark pool of blood spread slowly out from the door—flowing around the pistol, congealing around Lucas' tennis shoes—and he'd hardly had time to process this when something barked *inside* the classroom.

And when he looked toward the noise he saw that a pair of velociraptors (as well as a cycad tree) had materialized in the middle of the nearest wall—just materialized, out of thin air—and were jerking and struggling, trying to free themselves from the sheetrock.

Trying ... and succeeding.

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SAMMI COULD LITERALLY see the individual insects stuck in the grill of the Peterbilt when it simply vanished—*pow, like that*. As though it had never existed.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," he said, struggling to get out from under the bike, while Annie did likewise and scrambled to her feet. They both flipped up their visors.

"I think we need help," she said, and, contrary to her character, began crying. "Where's your cellphone? We need to call DJ."

"This is no mescaline trip, Annie," he snapped, grunting as he righted the bike, then tore off his coat and began cleaning the bug guts off the windshield. "Look at this shit. This is *real*."

She moved to respond then paused, staring off down the highway, first north, then south. “Where is everybody? Where are all the other cars?”

He dusted himself off and followed her gaze. “Just vanished, I reckon. Like that truck.”

She looked at the sky forlornly. “Jesus ... look at it.”

He did so, watching as the clouds boiled and spiraled slowly and what appeared to be heat lightning flickered in the distance. But it wasn’t just the otherworldly weather that struck him and filled him with terror, it was the strange lights that seemed to bleed in and out of each other, lights that were of a color he had never seen, and which hurt his mind to behold. “The party is on hold, we need to stop at Pine Stump Junction,” he said, and seated himself on the bike. “They’ll be cops there, radios. *Guns*.” He looked at Annie, who continued to gaze at the sky. “People are going to need our help.”

“Guns,” she whispered absently. “But we have a gun ... right there in the saddlebag. And DJ is expecting us ...”

“Annie, *please*.” He held out a gloved hand.

At last she climbed on behind him and he kicked it into gear.

And then they were on their way, and Sammi was doing his best to focus on the road ahead even as the countryside all around them became a phantasmagoria of prehistoric flora and fauna. And perhaps it was only because he was so intently focused that they didn’t crash when a *Tyrannosaurus rex* lumbered across the road directly in front of them—carrying a dead buck in its mouth.

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CARINA LOOKED AT THE water slide and knew it was her only chance. She dove for it even as the velociraptor lunged at her—nearly toppling into the water as it did so—then took its upper edge in her hands and began working her way up its length. That’s when the plesiosaur’s head and neck—she knew it was a plesiosaur because she’d seen one on the Discovery Channel—burst from the water, snapping at her viciously and managing to strike only centimeters from her foot—before she kicked it in its snout and forced it back, albeit momentarily. But it was enough that she was able to work her way farther up—slipping in the jet-stream, fighting the current—until she had escaped its range and was well on her way to the top.

And then she was there, she was out of the water and gripping the platform's railing, and what she saw below was a pool turned virtually red with blood ... as more than one plesiosaur continued to pull people beneath the surface and the "lucky" ones who had escaped were torn to pieces by the raptors.

Then she was running, bursting through the door to the upper promenade and finding her way to the stairs, which she descended so fast that she nearly fell sprawling, and when she reached her bicycle she immediately went to work on the lock—although her hands trembled furiously—until, at last, she realized the bike's frame had been fused with a cycad bush ... and something in her just quit, gave up.

After which the only thing to do was to shrink into the corner and make herself as small as she possibly could, and hope that someone might come, an adult, perhaps, a cop, her mother, even, with yet another stepdad, one who maybe, just maybe, wouldn't abandon her.

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LUCAS SUPPOSED IT WAS the gun, which he'd picked up and wiped off before they'd squeezed through the classroom windows—all he knew for sure was that everyone had begun looking to him as though he were some kind of leader. And the funny thing was, he *felt* like a leader, or at least as though he were awake—truly awake—for the first time in his life. After all, it had been he who had snatched up the gun and killed the raptors, he who had instructed everyone to quickly climb through the windows, and he who had led them to the corner of the building, where they now stood watching the tyrannosaur as it greedily devoured the triceratops. What he didn't know was what to do next, at least until he saw the big, yellow school bus returning from its rounds, and ordered everyone to make a beeline for it.

This they did, arriving at its doors before it had even come to a complete stop, at which point they began pounding on the glass with their fists and one pistol grip, causing the driver to open the panels and begin shouting, "What the hell's gotten into you kids? And you, you know toy guns aren't allowed in school! Why—"

"You don't know?" asked Sally Meyers, unbelievably.

"He needs glasses worse than Four-eyed Freddy," said Thomas.

“Hey, go fuck your mother some more,” said Freddy.

“Hey, hey! What kind of language is that?” snapped the driver. “Now get away from this door, all of you, or I’ll—”

A single report rang out without warning, causing everyone to jump—especially the bus driver—and those gathered turned to look at Lucas, who was holding the gun in the air. “With all due respect, Mr. Bus Driver, I’m asking that you direct your attention to the southeast corner of the school, quickly.”

He did so immediately and did a little doubletake, then his face lost all color as he got up from his seat and staggered out the doors, still looking on. At last he said, “Sorry, kids. But you’re on your own.” And then he *ran*.

“Mister, don’t!” shouted Sally—but it was too late; the rex just happened to look up from its meal and apprehended him almost instantly ... and now it was coming, coming *fast*, and the bus driver had scarcely reached his pickup when the beast surged forward and closed its jaws about his head.

Lucas didn’t hesitate. “Everyone get in, let’s go,” he said, and slipped into the driver’s seat even as the rex shook the bus driver violently and threw him to the ground—then turned its attention to them.

They all clambered in after him and he shut the doors, but was horrified when he realized that the bus was an older model with a manual transmission. He pushed in the clutch and jammed it into gear regardless, struggling to reach the pedals and see out the windshield at the same time, trying to remember what his dad had shown him, trying not to think about whether his mom and dad were even still alive—and killed the engine almost immediately.

He turned the key without delay and there was nothing, then looked up to see the tyrannosaurus moving toward them rapidly and tried again, this time pushing in the clutch. Everyone cheered as the old bus sputtered to life. At last he eased off the clutch and they lurched forward, even as the rex snapped at empty air behind them, but the dreary mathematics of their situation was clear even to Lucas—for they would never be able to outrun such an animal in first gear alone, and he didn’t think for a minute he’d be able to manage a shift into second.



FROM THE MOMENT THEY roared into Pine Stump Junction it was obvious to both of them that they would find no help there. Indeed, besides a hand-

ful of schools and churches and a YMCA, there was scarcely a “there” there at all—no people, no police presence, not so much as a tumbleweed—or so it seemed until they rumbled past the Y and saw a girl of about 12 huddled near the bicycles, at which point Sammi geared down and brought the Harley to a complete stop.

“What’s going on? Why are we stopping?” asked Annie, suddenly alarmed.

Sammi indicated the girl with a nod of his head. “We seem to have a survivor,” he said, and pushed up his visor. “Hello there! Are you hurt in any way?”

The girl didn’t so much as look up—only curled tighter into a ball as the Harley idled.

“Put it in gear,” said Annie abruptly. “There’s nothing we can do for her.”

“She’s in shock,” said Sammi, and shouted again: “I said hello there! Are you all right?”

“*Sammi*. Put it in gear.”

“I’m not just going to leave—”

“*We’ve no room for her*. What we need to do is get to DJ’s. He’s got guns, food, liquor ... we can come back for her lat—”

And there was a sound, an engine sound, which sputtered and died even as a school bus appeared across the street and finally rolled to a stop. Nor had Sammi even processed the sight before a T. rex emerged into full view—brushing its great head against the vehicle’s hull and trying to roll it over, gnashing its teeth. And it was in that very instant that Sammi realized precisely what the hell was going on—for the bus was full of children, and what was more, it was being driven by one, as well.

“Jesus gods, Sammi. Put it in gear, let’s go.”

And he *did* put it in gear, having realized, at last, that she was right: there was nothing they could do. And he realized, too, as they tore away from the scene, that the girl had looked up at the last instant, looked up and began running after them.

*That’s right*, came a voice, wan, disinterested, *her* voice, following him still, as it had followed him since the divorce and the buying of the winning Lotto ticket, as it had followed him since meeting Annie and across the entire country ... *just keep riding. After all, that’s what you’re good for, Sammi. Riding and driving away.*

*And what of it, bitch?* He cycled up through the gears viciously. *At least I’m good for something. I’m good for boning Annie. And I’m good for drinking and*

*smoking and dropping mescaline. What I'm no good for is kids. What I'm no good for is saving anyone from the apocalypse—or anything else. So yes, I'm driving away. Because it's the end of the world as we know it ... and I feel fine.*

*Just fine.*

*I feel ...*

He took the bike out of gear and skidded to a halt in the middle of the road, where they just sat and idled for what seemed a long time.

“What are you doing?” protested Annie. “Why are we stopping?”

But he just ignored her and kicked it into gear, tearing back toward Pine Stump Junction—back toward the running girl and the school bus full of children, back toward the T. rex and its head full of fearsome teeth. And so intent upon his driving was he that he didn't give a thought as to why Annie had opened one of the saddlebags and was rifling through its contents, nor just how truly dangerous throwing in with someone who was essentially a complete stranger to you could ultimately prove to be.

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BY THE TIME THEY ARRIVED back at the YMCA—skidding to a halt behind a stand of newly materialized cycad trees—the girl had taken refuge beneath a nearby pickup ... and the rex, having managed to puncture the roof of the school bus with its teeth, was beginning to peel back the metal.

“Here's the plan, baby—I'm not saying it's a good one,” said Sammi, and put out the kickstand. “But I know you can ride a little, right? So here's the deal: Get the girl and put her on the back of the bike, then make tracks for DJ's as fast as you can. I'm going to commandeer that bus.”

“I can just barely ride, and you know it,” said Annie. “Just please, for the love of God, get us out of here.”

“I'm afraid I can't do that, Annie.” He took off his helmet and dropped it to the ground, moving to get off the bike—but froze as something was jammed against his ear—a small gun, he knew, *his* gun.

“I'm afraid you're going to have to,” said Annie. There was a sound like a ratchet handle as she cocked the weapon. “Now put it in gear.”

"Have you gone insane? You know we can't just leave a bunch of kids to be torn to pieces. *The party's over, Annie*—can't you understand that? It's time to pay the bill."

"No, baby. It's time for *you* to pay the bill." She pressed the muzzle of the pistol tighter against his ear. "You think I let just any over-the-hill wannabe have his way with me? Did you think it was your cock that's been keeping me around?" She laughed. "No, baby. It's been the bike and it's been the money. It's been the 24-hour party. And now you're going to get me to DJ's—or I'm going to put a bullet through your brain and do it myself."

He looked at the school bus as it lurched forward again and stalled, heard the children scream as the roof continued to peel back the roof.

"Do it yourself, then," he said, and got off the bike. "I'm going to help those kids."

He moved to leave then paused, looking at her over his shoulder. "You were a boring lay, anyway. You bad girls always are. And the money was pretty much shot."

She slid forward to the driver's seat and put up the stand, then shrugged. "It was fun while it lasted."

And then she was gone—not down the road, rumbling and roaring, just gone—replaced by a stand of hoary-looking cycad bushes.

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IT HAD TAKEN SOME DOING, convincing the girl under the truck that he was there to help and wouldn't leave until she crawled out to him and they could join the others in the bus—but she had, and he'd managed to get the bus going and away from the tyrannosaur well before the last of the dying light finally bled from the sky completely.

And now they were back on the Interstate, a highway Lucas had dubbed "Thunder Lizard Road," and they'd gotten what children they could back to what parents remained, and Sammi and Lucas and Carina had gathered at the front of the bus as a sort of redeye flight crew as they motored into the unknown, having not much of a plan but to get to the first major city, where it was hoped they might find someone, anyone, who knew what was going on.



And though their collective fate was uncertain at best, Sammi felt oddly fulfilled as he tuned the radio and tried to find a news broadcast—knowing that, whatever awaited them down the road, it would be better than the life he had been living ... for a man needed purpose as much as he needed air itself.

And he had found his purpose at last.

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The End