

RUNNING ON EMPTY

A Dramatic Monologue

by
J.J. Jonas



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On the night before Christmas Eve I was returning from a hand off. The shuttling of children between parents, parties of a failed union, is a fact of life that knows no holiday. As I left the marriage, I chose to leave teaching and pursue writing. Choices bring sacrifices and consequences. The price of my choices and consequences had been to accept a job at a small local newspaper at half my previous salary, a tiny apartment on my father's ranch and a host of negotiations of expenses formerly taken for granted such as enough gas to get home. My daughter's father and I had made a deal—we'd meet halfway in exchange for help with gas money for my trip back. It was enough that I had to ask for help; it was demoralizing enough to use her gift money to get from point A to point B. Even pride has a price.

When my daughter and I had arrived to meet her father, he quickly notified me that the deal we'd struck the week before was no longer valid. I was too angry to be insulted or to care. Now I just had to get home.

I had nothing but a little bit of loose change, no credit cards, no checkbook, nothing. I had long ago locked those kinds of temptations up in my dad's safe so I would not be tempted to spend what I did not have. I chided myself for not having a backup plan, but I had had too much pride to ask my father to borrow his credit card in case of emergency. I did have a cell phone, though, which I'd been obliged to keep for work purposes, so I quickly dialed his number. The menu on the phone displayed, "Searching for Service." After a few minutes of waiting, I dialed his number to see if it would go through. It did not. I swear, you get five miles outside a decently-sized town in West Texas and you're roaming. It puts a whole new twist on the Lone Star State's advertising campaign that Texas is a whole other country. I decided to start back and call him from a pay phone on the way.

I drove down the road, listening to music to appease my frustration, and cursed everything from technology to ex-husbands. I watched the gas gauge slowly descend and I pulled over at the next town to try to reach my father. The phone rang and rang, but instead of the answering machine which I was hoping for, I got only a recording.

ROBOTIC OPERATOR RECORDING VOICE

We're sorry. All circuits are busy right now. Please hang up and try your call again later.

I just love modern technology, don't you?

Whatever happened to the days where you could pick up the phone like Andy Griffith and ask Operator Sarah to connect you through to your party? A real person, not just a recording. I drove to the next town and called again. Same recording. Yeah, where was Operator Sarah when you needed her? Frankly, Gomer or Goober might have been more helpful in my situation, but I didn't see them in sight either.

Finally, I was at my last stop before the last forty-mile stretch home. I stared at the gas gauge again, hoping somehow that I could will it to cooperate with me. The stubborn thing would not comply.

I closed my eyes and shifted into "Drive." I convinced myself that maybe I could make it.

About twenty miles down the road, I realized that I was wrong.

After exhausting all the curse words I knew, including the ever-popular colloquialisms of "dad-gum-it" and "Why in the Sam Hill didn't I" -- **(pause)** -- who in the heck is Sam Hill anyway? I directed most of these expletives at my own stupidity, tossing a few back down the road to my ex-husband, and throwing some out to the universe for good measure. I pulled over to the side of the road and parked my vehicle safely out of the way of traffic, which had now diminished. Everyone else, of course, had the good sense to be in a warm city mall, doing some last-minute shopping.

I looked up at the temperature reading on the overhead display. Thirty-five degrees outside. I had no jacket and was wearing a loose sweater, jeans, and some black, strappy-heeled sandals. Now, indeed, this is the appropriate attire for starving artist types and aspiring writers, but it was hardly conducive to being stranded twenty miles from the closest Seven-Eleven.

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