

Blackout in Barstow!

by JC Bailey

It was a dark and stormy night....No, really---it really was dark and stormy.

We were driving south on Interstate-15 in California late one summer afternoon. The clouds had built up all day and the storms were beginning to vent their wrath on the sparse population of this section of nowheresville. Lightning, thunder, heavy downpours and huge 18-wheelers all around convinced us to take a break and get dinner.

Through the walls of water cascading down appeared an off-ramp sign near Barstow offering “gas food”, which seemed appropriate enough. I steered onto the ramp thankful to be away from the madhouse up on the freeway. As the rain squall passed we found a large service area, one of those truck, car, restaurant, gift shop mega-stop areas found on major thoroughfares.

With the cracks of thunder booming around us we bolted from the car into the main door to find the restaurant and wait out the storm. As we entered the door, we found ourselves in a single entrance area with a cashier booth standing guard. On the right side was the trucker area, behind it was the automobile area, in the center was the store area and to the left was the coffee shop/cafeteria.

We were seated in the back of the large dining room near a window in one of those well-worn booths that had a payphone in case we wanted to call someone. As we waited for the waitress, we took stock of quite a few interesting folks all around us.

At one long table sat one family of about a dozen in number and ranging in ages from about 3 to 90. Interestingly, the men all had pony tails and tattoos while the women had short hair and tattoos. They all probably rode Harleys. By the other windows sat two young Asian tourists who appeared to have absolutely no idea where they were nor how to communicate that to anyone. Behind us was an older couple quietly eating soup and otherwise completely ignoring each other. By the cafeteria table some young children ran around excitedly throwing chickpeas at each other. The counter seats displayed a row of large trucker types with their buttocks in varying degrees of exposure.

Meanwhile, outside the storms continued to march in, each with increasing volumes of rain, thunder and lightning. We finished eating and continued to observe the wide variety of humanity somehow gathered in this particular place at this particular time. Suddenly, a brilliant flash of light followed immediately by an ear-shattering boom brought everyone’s head up from their meal. Instantly all the lights in the building went out. Shrieks, curses and squeals quickly replaced the previous din of conversation.

In the gloom, everyone looked around as if to confirm they were still living and in one piece. As suddenly as the lights had gone out, our waitress, a sort of cross between Lucille Ball and a football player, began barking out orders like a Marine drill instructor.

“Everyone stay in your seat! For your own safety, remain in your seat! Don’t get up or move!”, she bellowed. Then she proceeded to run around the room by each table to make sure we all did as we were ordered. Everyone appeared to be so shell shocked, first by the thunder and now by the waitress, that there was hardly a murmur. Slowly, conversation began again, most of it discussing this mad woman hopping from table to table making sure no one dared move.

As we sat there in the increasing darkness, a strong smell of grease began to permeate the air. With no electricity the fans over the deep fat fryers and stoves couldn’t remove the smoke. Worse, the air was

beginning to thicken noticeably. Being late summer in Barstow, the temperature outside was still about 100 degrees and there was now no air conditioning. The combination of grease, hot oils, bathroom cleaning solvents and gasoline odors, not to mention our nearby family of tattooed bikers, was something that really has to be experienced. It defies description.

Fortunately, we had been given our check before the power went out. The next time “Master Sergeant Waitress” stormed by checking on her troops, we timidly asked for permission to leave. “Stay there! I’ll get someone to escort you out!”, she commanded. “Aye-aye, Ma’am!”, I replied automatically.

Soon another waitress was ordered to escort us to the front to pay our bill. Our waitress then bellowed at the top of her lungs, “Table 26 coming out!”. As we rounded the corner into the doorway from the restaurant to the cashier we found no fewer than six other employees each standing in doorways or taking up other strategic positions. Here it became apparent that the sudden change from eatery to boot camp was not due to concern for our safety but rather concern for receiving payment for our meal!

The doorway sentry confirmed with our escort waitress that, yes, we were the right people from table 26, then passed us off to the manager. The manager again confirmed that we were table 26 and that we had our check. She then asked that we pay in cash since they could not process credit cards. When we confirmed that we could do this, we were permitted to move forward to the cashier, who apparently had the only flashlight in the entire complex.

Paying our bill in cash and receiving our change in pennies, quarters and one-dollar bills, the cashier then reported to the manager that we were “clear”. The manager then escorted us over to the entrance so we could exit this asylum. As we neared the outside door, we faced one more hurdle: a very large, and mean looking, young wrestler type who sat with arms folded across her chest in a chair leaning up against the only exit, which was locked. The manager barked out to this last guard that we were “cleared”. With that, the woman rose, turned, unlocked the door and held it open for us to leave.

Finally we were moving outside to freedom. The guards had been satisfied and the whole chain of command had given permission for us to exit our prison. We were free at last!

Then, as we walked out the door, the manager suddenly stopped, turned and smiling sweetly said, “Thank you for coming in today. We hope we’ll see you back here again real soon.”!