

Babylon road
by Steph Brochu
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Prologue

Sharp sounds. As clouds of dust are lifted by a gentle breeze, you panic. Quickly run, don't stop to look. Pink brown flesh, erupting into red. Smell of urine, of dirt, of shit.

Try not to meet their eyes, lest you see that they, as you, are scared. Not shitless, since it feels, smells like that, like if one of them, some of them, shat themselves. It could also be John, dead, right besides you, covered in the brightest colors you've seen in weeks. Colors that breaks the monotony of all this dirt, all this brown and gray and green. So much green that you never want to see a plant again in your life, as short as that may be. And you remember, you remember that the Sarge has said that when you died, you'd shit and piss your pants.

Stop thinking, just do. Go back to that happy place. Because this is all a lie, it's nothing like what they told you it was to be. At least you still have that place to hide.

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Blood. In your eyes and everywhere around you. The first thing you try to do is figure out what's going on. Gotta get that fix. Wait. Wait. You got that fix.

The car. You're in your car. The other car came and you didn't see it. Or didn't care about it. Your head seems fine and doesn't hurt that much. Maybe the adrenaline. Maybe something else.

Then it hits you. There's someone else in the car with you.

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Darkness. All around you, with a few sounds coming from all directions: a giggle here, some chewing sounds there. A gasp followed by a sharp slapping noise and a girlish voice admonishing whomever she is with.

Impatiently you ignored them, staring straight ahead, waiting for that space in the dark to burst into life. Just when you thought that there might be something wrong, the screen erupted into light and images started moving. You look up slightly and can see the beam of light and if you turn your head just so, you can see the winking white eye on the other side of the room. But you don't want to turn your head, because the movie is about to start and this is your favorite. It's the one about soldiers landing on the beach and taking back a whole country. It's a long film with plenty of violence, which is why there are so many teenagers here. Some, like you, are here for the movie and what it means. Others are here for less respectable reasons, because no one can see what they do in pairs in the dark.

Sometimes you think it would be nice to share your time with someone, share this moment, this movie. And yet, you cannot help to think that if there was someone else, you wouldn't be able to do as you please, devote your time and attention to this movie. Yet...

John Wayne walks into the frame and commands your attention. You snap out of that space and concentrate on the movie, trying to capture, again, every nuance, every

word. You concentrate even though you must have seen the movie 10 times already. It's almost as if you're trying to catch the actors slipping or making a mistake.

And then, you forget about everything and just drop into the film...

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Screams. Or at least, very loud noise, a constant ringing in your head. As you try to make it stop, you notice that you're probably doing it. And then, as your ears adjust you notice that you're not doing it, that it's the car horn blaring.

And then you remember about the other person in the car. You try to figure out if she's alright without turning around to look in the back seat. You try to focus out the sound of the horn and hear her breathing, talking, screaming.

And you can't hear anything else.

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Peace, that's what you feel when the needle hits and you can feel the heat coursing through you veins. The hunger drops, sated for a little while and you ride that heat, that peace, that pleasure as long as you can. And you forget everything. You forget about the war, the friends you made just to lose them a few weeks later, the screaming faces of the dying. You forget...

It was simpler, somehow, back at the front. The first time you pushed the needle in, you were so tired of everything around you. You just needed to get away for a little while. Some of your platoon mates told you that if you were not careful, you'd die from the shit you put in your veins. The way you figured it, between the needle and a bullet, it didn't make much of a difference. You'd just lower your chances of making it back home alive. That was alright. She probably would have moved on anyway. Why would she wait for anyway? It wasn't like you were a great catch before the war anyway and the war didn't help. Even before you started the junk you were damaged goods. The junk allowed you to push the screaming faces of the dead further, allowed you not to think about it for a little while.

In the long run, it would be better for everyone if she didn't wait.

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Tears. Your eyes swell up with tears or at least, the tears fight for space with the blood. You don't want to turn around because you know how she is.

You just undo your seatbelt and open the door slowly. The passengers of the other cars don't seem to be moving. The black car catches the moonlight, gleaming like an evil bird, an evil cat.

You step out of the car and just don't look back.

You know that the life the junk was supposed to take was yours and now it's taken someone else's. You know what you have left. The junk, that's all there is for you.

CAR INTERIOR, NIGHT. A MAN IS SITTING IN THE CAR, SLEEPING

Startled, he awoke, as if something had pricked him. Now that the engine had stopped, the mechanical sound that had kept him asleep was gone, a reassuring heartbeat silenced. He pushed himself away from the wheel, shook his head and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. Unsure of where he was, he ran his hand on the black passenger seat, noticing that it was made of vinyl, not leather as he had first assumed. He noticed because the vinyl had stuck to his hand, stopping its gliding along the surface. He looked around, trying to see something apart from just silhouettes in the night. The only thing he could see of the small town appeared to be a diner or restaurant of some sort. At least that's what the sign proclaimed. He looked in the back of the car, expecting to see someone. Of course, the car was empty except for himself.

Man

(speaking low, as if to hear his own voice)

Well... Sign says Eats... Might as well...

EXTERIOR, SMALL TOWN, DIRT ROAD. NIGHT.

He got out of the car, knees bending from the sudden attention, resting a hand on the still warm hood of the car. Once he was sure that he was steady on his feet and not appearing like an old drunk, he made his way to the diner. Looking back at the car, at first he could not remember when he got it. It was a brand new Studebaker, this year's model. The black paint job almost made it disappear into the night, the silhouette visible only because of the moonshine reflecting off the perfect finish.

It was a warm summer night, with the full moon high in the sky. You could almost smell the fields of wheat or oat that probably lied just out of town. There wasn't that many buildings in this town he noticed again, at least none that you could see outright. It was almost as if the inhabitant of the town decided to keep their lights out so that people passing in the night would not see them. Strange, thinking that people would like to hide in their house, but also hide their house itself.

The man started walking towards the diner, his black shoes leaving small puffs of dust from the gravel road. Smoothing down his shirt trying to make himself presentable, he felt the bump of his glasses in his shirt pocket. Slightly taken aback, he took them out and put them on. Suddenly, the world was back in focus.

Man

(to himself)

Well, at least I ain't really going blind...

EXTERIOR, DIRT ROAD. NIGHT

He ran a hand through his black hair, trying to get a cowlick he could feel to lay down with the rest of his hair. He could feel the hair grease under his fingers and, with a little bit of spit and some of that grease, he managed to win the fight against the rebellious tuft of hair. From the corner of his eyes, he spied a watch on his right wrist. Looking at its face, he could see that it was indeed late, almost 2300 hours. The seconds hand seemed to be going a little fast, as if it was trying to show off, showing that although it measured only a small span of time, it was still better and faster than its two brothers, hour and minute. The brand name on the face did not strike a chord and although he tried briefly to remember when he purchased the watch, the man couldn't.

EXTERIOR, RESTAURANT. NIGHT

The place looked old, with its faded yellowish sign proclaiming its vocation (“EATS!”) for the world to see. He tried looking inside, through the dirty window, but could only see shapes, one behind the counter, the other before. Whether these shapes would turn out to be humans, he wasn’t sure. They could be stacks of boxes or dead bodies for all he knew. The thought of dead bodies sitting at the counter made him feel queasy and he wasn’t quite sure why it should affect him so.

Just before opening the door, he tried again to make out the shape that made up the rest of the town, but he couldn’t. The only building that he could clearly see, apart from the fact that he was standing on its very porch, was the diner, a bright light attracting customers and flies in the night. He turned back towards the door, mindful not to make a noise, scared that he might wake the houses, the people who hid in them.

INTERIOR, DINER. THE WHOLE PLACE IS BATHED IN LIGHTS

He got to the door, pushed it open and walked in. The music that welcomed him wasn’t what he expected, but it still made him feel welcome, with its lyrics about trouble and love. He was relieved to see that the man behind the counter was alive and so was the other man sitting at the counter. He wasn’t sure why the thought of coffins and death entered his mind just at that moment, but he pushed those thoughts aside.

Man

(Addressing the Cook and the Client)

Evening. [The man sits at the counter, barely making eye contact. He coughs]

Cook

[He moves toward the Man, crossing his arms and looking at the stranger warily.] Can I get you a cup of coffee or sumthin?

Man

[Still staring at the counter] Coffee would be nice.

INTERIOR, DINER

Grunting, the cook turned around, shaking his head for the benefit of the Client. Trying too hard not to look out of place, the man stared at the counter. Hearing the others mumbling to themselves, he put his hands on the counter, pretending to examine them. He noticed the ring on his index finger, the one that Joan had given him when they wedded. A simple band of gold. Taking it off, he examined the interior. An elegant script declared “To Cary, always.”

He played with the ring for a few seconds, making the light bounce off of it, sending golden spikes off to nowhere. Cary put the ring back on, where it felt good, like it belonged, like it had always been there. He tried to remember what it was like not to have the ring on his finger, but could not for the life of him.

The day of his wedding to Joan had been the proudest day of his life. They had been dating ever since he could remember, the classic story of the girl next door. He remembers bringing her flowers when he was barely 10, the first time he asked her out on a date. The movie had been a John Wayne western, the one musical he had made in his life. He was about the only person that he knew that actually liked “Paint Your

Wagon”, but that perhaps had more to do with the fact that it was the first real kiss he ever had that from the movie itself. He remembers asking her to marry him, the day after he enlisted. They had married quickly, making sure that they had sealed their union before he shipped out.

He felt awkward, like the other two men were staring at him as he just looked at his hand. He needed to do something with his eyes, his hands.

Cary
(Talking to the Cook)

You wouldn't happen to have a newspaper handy, would you?

INTERIOR, DINER

The cook closed the paper that was lying open on his side of the counter, rolled it up and, along with the white cup of coffee, set it in front of Cary.

Cary
(Without looking up from his hands)

Thanks.

INTERIOR, DINER

Cary extended his hand slowly, grabbing the steaming cup of coffee by the handle of the cup. It was cracked, but appeared to be clean. Bringing the cup to his lips, he could smell the hot bitterness of the coffee. He took a tentative sip, taking the time to savor the coffee. For a small town diner, it wasn't bad. It was, if pushed come to shove, even better than the one Joan made for him every morning. Struck by the oddness of the thought, he stopped and tried to remember what she would be doing right now. Probably fast asleep in their bedroom, back home.

Grabbing the paper, he brought his eyes to the headline, his eyes not really seeing it. He tried to concentrate, to take his mind off the funeral he would have to attend in a few days, but was unable. At least, the paper would act as a barrier against any conversation attempt by the cook or the other client.

Cook
(to no one in particular)

There he is again. Just you stay there, mister, I'll show you... [The cook reaches for a baseball bat under the counter. He straightens up] Keep an eye, Hank, I'll be right back. [He moves away from behind the counter and moves towards the door]

INTERIOR, DINER

Pulling his gaze from the paper, Cary turned his head and looked out the window. He caught a fleeting glimpse of the cook's white mass as he went out the door and could see, through the dirty window, a man. The man's gaze was as empty as that of some of the prisoners Cary had seen during the war, defeated, without any hope. His hair was unkempt and his chin sported a few days growth. What really struck Cary as odd was the army jacket the man wore. Before he could take a closer look, the cook came at the man with his baseball bat. The man simply gazed back at the cook, took a few steps back and disappeared in the night.

I could feel the pain coursing through my arm as I rolled off the side of my bed. The purple-blue bruise in the crook of my arm had turned yellowish on the edges and, while it didn't smart as much as it did before, I just had to poke it with my finger to find out if it felt the same way. It smarted, but not as much. The pain was finally dulling, the same way my attention and awareness dimmed just before I fell asleep every night, a book in my hands.

With the funeral in a few days, my mother, still shocked by the news and the sudden death, had decided that it would be a good idea for me to go see our family doctor and get a checkup, which unfortunately for me included the taking of a blood sample. Even though I had had a fascination with needles and other sharp objects since early childhood, I was repulsed by them as well. I had a deep fear of needles, the kind of fear that meant that I couldn't take my eyes away when I saw them. Sort of like people who rubberneck when they pass a truly horrible accident on the highway, even though they are completely disgusted by the sight.

The idea of a needle piercing my skin, digging into my arm to take away some of my precious blood or, even worse, put something into my arm frightened me deeply. Don't get me wrong. I could easily watch someone else get an injection or having some of their blood taken. That, on the other hand, was a beautiful thing. I guess such dichotomy came from being an only child and the constant dotting of my mother and father.

It didn't help that, since he was the only doctor in our small town and had been ministering to everyone, Dr Grant decided it would be a good time to talk to me about sex and venereal diseases. After all, I had just turned sixteen that summer and, since my parents did not like talking about such a subject, someone had to give me the talk before I went and did something stupid.

"There is a time in a young man's life," he started. I interrupted him.

"Yes doctor, I know. I should really be careful with girls and stuff. The truth of the matter is, I've never even kissed a girl before." I looked at him, my eyes searching his face.

"You know, your mom told me about your intention of joining the army," he said to me, quickly changing the subject while fiddling with some needles, looking for the perfect one to stick in my arm.

"Huh, yeah, I've been thinking about it. I love it here, but I need to go see the world, see what it's all about. And it's not like Uncle Sam is not offering me the perfect opportunity to do it for free," I said, trying real hard to appear too nervous. "When I come back, I want to go to university and maybe become an engineer or something."

"That's a good plan son," he said, distracting me for a moment with that smile of his, while his hand stabbed me in the arm. The sudden pain sent me into minor shock, as the world suddenly drained of color. I actually blacked out, just for a second. Next thing I knew, his face was close to mine, a look of worry quickly disappearing when he came into focus.

"I know you hate needles, but you're gonna have to get used to them if you go and join the army," he said, somewhat oblivious to the trauma I had just experienced. "And they won't be as gentle as I am with you."

Rubbing at my arm, I move to the window. Fully expecting to see daylight, I was greeted by night, only the shapes of the houses near mine to be seen. The moon was high in the sky, providing the only illumination. All I could see was the silhouette of the buildings, as if they were hiding or they were not quite ready to be seen.

Although it was not a habit, I had been waking up in the middle of the night more and more in the last month. Not on purpose, mind you, but rather as if something was calling me. And, increasingly, instead of going back to sleep, I would take advantage of these occasions to go for a walk in town. The whole place was so peaceful at that time, with only the Diner open. Sometimes I would even go to Suzie's place to see if she was awake. I kidded myself that I would easily work up the courage to ask her to come and walk with me, but she was never awake, so I never had to fess up to the fact that the idea scared the dickens out of me, and that I would not know what to do if she did indeed accept.

So instead, I would simply go up to her window and look at her, sleeping, her face framed by the pillow and the light of the moon. She looked so peaceful there, almost as if she was no longer alive.

The sudden idea of death brought back the memory of the funeral in a few days. I had been trying to push it away from my thought, since I still hadn't come to term with the idea. I did not understand how he could have possibly died, what with his wife and daughter that loved him so much. And then there were the rumors, of a double life and all that crap. Somehow, it made no sense.

I pulled on a pair of pants and put on my favorite t-shirt and walked slowly to my window. I knew my parents had just gone to bed, and I didn't want to wake them up. It would be hard enough to explain why I wasn't asleep without having to explain the fact that I was dressed and about to step out the window.

As I opened the window, the cold night air stuck me and raised goose bumps on my skin. Stepping over the windowsill, I made sure to make as little noise as possible. Once on the other side, I thought about closing the window and then decided against it.

I could see the light coming from the Diner in the distance. I made my way slowly there, not expecting to see anyone else but Hank and Cook at this time of night. Why Cook kept the Diner open even though he knew no one ever came out at this time was beyond me. At least, he kept quiet about my night excursions, a little secret between me and him.

As I got closer to the diner, I saw a black car in the middle of the street, the engine off and the driver nowhere to be seen. The odd thing was that it wasn't so much parked as it was just abandoned there, in the middle of the street. When I passed it, I stopped. An idea crossed my mind, and, knowing that it probably wouldn't be true, I went back. I looked into the driver's side, fully expecting for the door to be locked and the keys not to be in the ignition.

As if someone wanted me to go for a ride, to get away from this town, the keys were in the ignition, as if waiting for me.

Surprised, I stepped back. I looked around for the driver of the car and all I could see was the silhouette of Cook, as he stepped out of the Diner, a baseball bat in his hand. I could not really see who he was walking toward, but I knew who it was. And I knew that I should.

My hand reached towards the door and I pulled on the door handle. The door opened.

Snap. A snapping sound comes from you left, distracting you from the task ahead. Not that you know what that task is, since you don't even recognize your environment. Everything is dark around you except for that window, with light coming out, drawing you closer like a moth. In the near distance, you can see the shape of a familiar black car.

You're not worried about not recognizing your environment because, truth be told, you've had no idea where you are for the last 5 years. You just keep on walking forward, finding food wherever you can, finding money for that next little hit. And the hit carries you away, in its arms, making everything so much easier.

Not everything, right? For all the times you tried, you still can't. You used to brag, back when you were across the pond, that you could snuff anyone's life and that they would never take you alive. After all, what good would you be if you were a prisoner? Better dead than be in their hands. But for all of your bragging back then, you can't do it. Even after taking her life and, in a manner, her mother's, your wife's.

All you can see is a shadow of someone going towards that car. Then, another noise snaps your attention forward again, but too late. Just as your eyes focus forward, your head explodes in a shower of sparks.

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Brightness. As you step in the bar, your eyes take a little while to adjust. You haven't been in a place this bright in ages. Not even the sun in the jungle is that bright. It is as if the owners are trying to tempt you, make you believe that this is good, this is right by leaving no shadows for bad things to hide in. All they succeed in is to show you the pale skins of the addicts, their veins dark tracings under paper-thin flesh. You wonder, for a second, if you took the time to really look at one of the addicts, if you could read its life on its skin, decipher the pains and the failures that brought them to this place.

As you stand there, gawking, your friend comes back to snap you out of it. He takes you by the forearm and drags you towards the bar.

The barman looks at you, smiling a gap-toothed smile. You nod and he nods back. He starts talking to your friend really quickly, sometimes pausing just long enough to point at a few girls sitting at the bar. You can't understand what either of them is saying but that's all right.

You haven't seen women in quite a while and it takes you a few seconds to identify them as being women, or more probably young girls. Skinny, their sickly yellow skins shine in the light and only makes you crave for your sweetheart that you left at home. At very least, seeing them takes away your lust for now and if everything he told you is true, what you came for will take away the rest of the lust and yearning for a little longer.

Finally your friend turns back to you, a light dancing in his eyes. He shows you the two small packets and the dirty syringes. He motions with his head towards a door in the back and you follow him.

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Sparks. As your head hits the ground, you somehow manage to maintain awareness. You roll to your left, instinctively, only to see the bat crash besides you,

raising a cloud of dust. You swing your legs to the left and snare your attackers legs into yours. With a quick twist of your body, you manage to throw him to the ground. You get up quickly, grabbing the bat as you do so.

You look inside and see that there are two other people sitting there. Seeing you get up, they stand up and run to the door. With the bat in both hands, you look at your attacker on the floor and think about swinging the bat downwards. It would be easy right now to crack his skull open, but for some reason, you hesitate.

You hear something in front of you and you snap you head up, in time to see one of the two men step outside and run towards you. Keeping the bat in your hands you leave the front of the shop to hide in the night.

Why did your body respond so? You've been feeding it nothing but gunk and junk for the last few years, ever since the accident. You should be so out of shape, out of training, and yet... And if it was just pure reflex, why didn't you kill the asshole who attacked you for no reason other than the way you look, the way you smell.

You stop thinking about it and concentrate on getting lost in the night. Sleeping outside will do no good tonight. You need a shelter and you need it fast.

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Sharp. As the needle hits, you no longer feel empty. You feel filled with a warmness, a feeling you haven't had since you were a small child. Everything around you is beautiful and wonderful as if it was the first time you'd seen it.

To see the world for the first time, this is what the needle was all about. To rediscover innocence, peace.

The problem came the next morning when you had to get back to your platoon. You didn't feel it at first, the hunger, and neither did your friend. At least, he didn't tell you. It wasn't his first time and he seemed to take a little longer to get out of that bar than you did. He told you to go ahead, that he would meet you outside. And you listened. When he came out, he looked a little happier than back when you left him, but you just chalked it up to the fact that he wasn't a morning person.

Of course, a few days later when the hunger struck, he was ready and you weren't.

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You try to see ahead of you but all you can see is the silhouette of the houses. You can't hear anything besides the thumping of blood in your ears, so you don't even know if they are behind you, looking for you or if they simply forgot about you. You don't care so much, you need to find shelter.

You go to the dark silhouette of one of the houses and try the window. No luck, it's locked. You decide to try the door, just on the off chance that the people of this place are stupid or trusting. And you can't believe you luck when the knob does turn in your hands.

You step inside, careful not to make a noise. The combat instincts snap back on as you crouch down low and go looking for the people who live here.

INTERIOR. RESTAURANT. NIGHT.

Hank ran past Cary and out the door. As much as Cary did not want to pay attention to what was going on, the urge was stronger than him. He dropped the paper on the counter. In two short steps he was at the diner's door, its cold handle in his hand. The door did not have a chance to quite close yet, so he simply had to push it open, almost hitting Hank in the back.

EXTERIOR. RESTAURANT. NIGHT

Slightly out of breath from the sprint, Cary looked for Hank and the reason why he ran out. As his eyes adjusted to the different light, he could see the cook lying prone on the floor. Hank was kneeling near him. Looking up and away, he could see a dim shape carrying a baseball bat in the distance. Cary was taken aback, sure that he had seen the man back away from Cook.

Cary
(to himself)

Great. Now I'm seeing things. Maybe I should grab some sleep instead of drinking coffee.

Cary approached the two men, trying not to be too nosy, but wanting to know what was going on.

Hank
(To Cook, ignoring Cary)

What happened? Did the wino do that to you? [He approaches his hand to Cook's head. Cook shakes his head and pushes the hand away.] You want I go after him and teach him what's what?

Cook
(Still groggy, unsure)

Don't know how he did it. I was about to teach him a lesson, had him on the floor and all. Then, boom! Nothing! Next thing I know, I can smell your stinky breath. [Cook is rubbing the back of his head.]

Hank
(to no one in particular)

All's I know is next time he comes around, I'll take care of him.

Cook
(looking angry)

Shut the fuck up. When's the last time you actually managed to beat up someone? And, for fuck's sake, I ain't some woman who needs defending. Now get the hell out of my way, I've got my Diner to take care of. [Cook pushes Hank away, gets up.] Where's my bat? [he looks around]

Cary
(leaning forward and pointing towards the darkness)
The guy, he took it. He went that way.

Cook
(still angry)
Mister, if I was you, I'd shut up right about now unless you want to tell me what the hell you want to eat or what you're doing in this here town.

Cary
(taken aback)
I... I'm here for the funeral. [points to the darkness] That's my car out there. [Turns head towards where he is pointing] It's... it was there. [advancing towards darkness] Where the hell did my car go?

Cook
(looking suspiciously at Cary)
I don't know what you're talking about, mister. I didn't see no car when I came out. Maybe that's because my attention was somewhere else, or maybe that's because there was no car. Right now, I can't say I like strangers really well, so you better not be lying about that funeral and tell me what you want. Else, you better go see if someone else wants to talk to you, cuz I ain't sure I want to look at anyone's ugly mug right about now.[Cook turns and looks at Hank] That goes for you as well, Hank. Get off my porch and go home.

Hank
(looking pissed)
Yeah, well fuck you too. See if I care if that fucking wino comes back and brains you. [Hank leaves]

Cary
You wouldn't know of a place where I could rent a room for the night, would you? The funeral is in a few days and since my car is gone...

Cook
No, but I know you owe me for that coffee. Better pay up now.

EXTERIOR, RESTAURANT. NIGHT.

Cary patted his jacket and his pants looking for the telltale lump of his wallet. Finding it in the rear pocket of his pants, he pulled it out and looked in it for some money. The only bills he could find were 5 dollars bills. He pulled one out.

Cary
(to Cook)
How much do I owe you?

Cook
(eying the bill)
\$5.00 will do. [Cook reaches for the bill and takes it] And as far as a place to sleep is concerned, you might want to try Old Sally's place. She might still be up at this time. Now git, I'm closing up and going home.

Cook walked pass Cary and went inside the restaurant. He turned around, close the door, and pulled out keys from his pocket. He locked the door and turned off the light.

Cary found himself in almost total darkness, the only light being that of the moon high up in the night sky.

EXTERIOR, STREET. NIGHT

Cary walked the streets of the small town under the moonlight, with only the silhouette of the buildings as company. He went to the place where his car had been not an hour ago and looked around. Leaning down to see if some sign of his car had been left behind, he could see nothing.

Cary
(to himself)
I wonder what son of a bitch took my car. [Stops and consider] I'm not even sure there is enough gas for them to go far. [He gets up] Not much use looking for it now, might as well wait for the morning and go to the cops.

Getting up, Cary looked around. He took a few hesitant steps, looking like a man who had just woken up and who was unsure of where he was or where he needed to go. He stopped, looked around and seemed to make up his mind. He headed off in between two buildings, his step surer than they were a few minutes ago.

EXTERIOR, IN FRONT OF LARGE BUILDING. NIGHT.

Cary stopped in front of a large building, a sign proclaiming its purpose in life as being "OLD SALLY'S HOTEL". Looking around for a sign of life, Cary saw none and decided to go up the steps anyway. He reached for the door, grabbing the handle.

The inside door opened, revealing an old lady, wearing a night coat. She looked somewhat sleepy, but despite this, her eyes are keen, fully aware of where she is and who she is.

Old Lady
(To Cary)
There you are, young man. It's about time you get here. You're three hours late. Get in.

The car seat felt weird beneath my ass. As I sat down, the seat felt worn, as if the car had been used on a long drive. Despite this, it felt comfortable, quickly taking the shape of my own ass. My hand reached for the keys in the ignition, shaking slightly. What if the keys actually worked? What if there was gas in the car? Where would I go? What if nothing happened?

Clearing my head quickly from these thoughts, I grabbed the key and gave it a turn. The engine caught right away, as if I had simply woken it from a light slumber. I thought of turning on the headlights, but changed my mind quickly. What if the owner of the car saw me? So I put the car into drive, backed away slowly, looking behind me to try and make sure I didn't plow into any house.

Once I had backed up enough, I turned the car around in someone's driveway and finally turned on the headlights. They illuminated the road ahead of me with a strange glare, bringing every imperfection of the road in sharp relief. I didn't drive too fast, just fast enough to get a feel of the car, a feel of the road. The problem came up quickly. It was nice to have a car with what appeared to be a fairly full tank of gas, but where would I go? I knew the village fairly well and some of the surrounding areas, but I really didn't know anything beyond that. What if I went too far and didn't have enough gas to come back? What if I didn't come back in time and my parents found out I had left during the night? What if the owner of the car told the cops his car was gone? There wasn't that many people in town and even less teenagers. It wouldn't take the police very long to figure out that I was the one who took the car.

Thinking of all these questions, it became apparent to me that I shouldn't go really far. Maybe I should just go up the mountain and look at the town from up there. Not that there would be that much to see, what with all the lights off and all, but it would still be interesting. And then it hit me. I should go and get Suzie and ask her to come with me. At least there would be someone to share this with, someone to talk to. And besides, it would make for a nice common bond between us, our little secret that no one else would know about, something we could share by just looking at each other.

So I turned the car around again and looked for a spot to park it. I didn't want to go back into town with it since I was scared of getting caught. I found a spot just off a junction and parked it underneath a tree. Once the car was stopped, I looked around to see if anyone was around, if anyone had seen me hide the car. I was about to open the car door and step out when I remembered the keys. I reached for them, hesitating slightly before taking them out of the ignition, feeling as if I indeed took the keys out it would somehow break the spell, like an alarm clock ringing and waking me up in the morning. The key came out of the ignition and nothing happened. I was still sitting in the car, still parked under a tree in the middle of the night, in the middle of nowhere.

I stepped out of the car and locked the doors. I almost left the key in the door, thinking that maybe the owner of the car would find it somehow and if he found the key in the door he might think that he had parked it there himself. Or maybe he would just take the car and leave, never reporting it stolen to the police. I changed my mind again and pocketed the key. I walked away, looking one more time behind me at the car, making sure that you couldn't really see it from the road. I headed back into town, back into that strange darkness made of shadows and silhouettes.

I got into town 30 minutes later. As I was heading towards Suzie's house, I noticed that the lights at the Diner were out. This was really odd, since Cook never closed the Diner, preferring to keep it open all night, until his wife came in early in the morning and took over while he went to sleep. No one knew why Cook did that, since there was really no one who would show up at night, only Hank and sometimes me. I guess Cook didn't want to miss any potential customers or something. He was like some sort of lighthouse in the darkness of the village, waiting for that ship to come.

I made my way to the Diner and went up the steps, still not believing the Diner to be really closed. As I got to the window, I peered in and did not see anyone there. I turned around, went down the steps and continued on my way to Suzie's.

As I got to the street corner, I saw someone sitting beneath a tree. Not really knowing what to do and not wanting to be caught on the streets at this time, I moved away as quietly as I could, hoping that the person would not see me. Just as I thought I was in the clear, I heard a voice calling me from behind.

"Hey there boy. Was wondering if you'd show up tonight."

The voice was familiar and I turned around to see Hank sitting there. I had not recognized him at first, but now that he had gotten up from beneath the tree and came towards me, I could recognize his crinkly old face.

"Hey Hank. What's going on? How come the Diner is closed? And what are you doing there?" I said, trying to appear casual. I did not want him to suspect I had taken the stranger's car or that I was going to try to get Suzie to come with me in that car. I didn't know if he knew about the car, but since there are not too many places for strangers to go late at night in the village, I figured he might have met the owner of the car.

"That's a mouthful of questions there... But yeah, I... I just didn't feel like going home right away. Cook decided to close the Diner because of that damn wino. He came a'sniffin around and Cook tried to teach him a lesson. Guess he's the one who got the lesson, so... yeah."

"Oh. Well, listen, I should go back home. I was just out, you know..."

"Yeah, on one of your nightly walks. Sure thing, boy. You go and get a good walk. I'm just gonna go back to.. I'm just gonna go home as well."

"Yeah, well, have a good one" I said to him, walking backward.

He just turned around, waving at me. I could tell that he was just going to go back beneath the tree. I didn't know why he'd rather sleep there than at home, but I guess people have their own reasons sometimes. Or maybe it was just that he was so used to spending all of his nights in the Diner with Cook that he was confused or something now that the Diner was closed. In any fashion, I had more important things to do than worry about Hank or the Diner.

I kept on walking, passing Sally's inn on my way. All the lights were off in her place, just like all the other houses in the village, except for the light downstairs, at the reception. I wondered who could have showed up so late at her inn, but then again, I had never really seen any strangers checking into her place. All I knew was that Sally's place was right next door to Suzie's, which meant that I was almost there and I still didn't know what I would do or what I would say when I woke her up.

Lemon. The sharp smell of citrus hits your nose as you step into the house. You can't really make out anything, except for the window and the silhouette it cuts out of shapes in front of it. Peering deeper, you can make a sofa and a hat stand. You let your eyes get used to the darkness and peer deeper. All you can see, apart from the couch, is a bookcase with some books in it and some dark shapes that look like they could be photos. You look around some more, looking for the old standards, but there are no sound system, no radio, no television. You can make out a door to your left and a small corridor ahead.

You take a moment to think and figure out that the corridor probably leads to the kitchen and maybe a small bathroom. The door should lead to a bedroom (the master's bedroom?) or at least a closet.

You grab the bat closer while listening to the still air. You try to calm down your breathing so that you can hear if there are other people around.

Nothing. Either the house is empty or everyone is deeply asleep.

You start to make your way towards the door and then you stop. You're not sure why, but you are drawn to the bookcase, to the dark squares sitting there, amongst the books. Unsure why, you need to know who lives here, who trusts the night with their life to the point of not locking the door. Not that it's unusual, in a small village, but they should know better. You never know when a wolf will come sniffing at your door. And that wolf happens to be human tonight. That wolf happens to be you.

You grab a square from the bookcase and bring it to the window. You lean the square towards the light, trying to catch some light so you can see, trying to make sure that the shine doesn't block out the picture just like the darkness covered it. When you finally lean it just right, you can make the people in the picture.

They're a happy family. Mom, dad and a young kid in an army helmet. They're all smiling, as if unaware.

- * -

Butter. The whole place smells like butter, more in the room with the seats and the screen than the other place where your dad bought popcorn. You like the sharp, salty taste of popcorn in your mouth, the way it crunches squishes depending on how soaked the piece is with butter. You look up at your dad and he's smiling down at you. You smile back.

You've never been to a movie in a theater before. Sure, you've seen movies at home, on that small black and white television with the bad sound, the one your dad keeps on trying to fix but only seems to succeed in making worse. You can't wait since you're going to see a war movie. You've been excited the whole day, going so far as to plead with your parents to let you wear the army helmet your aunt Sally gave you for your birthday. Of course they agreed to let you wear it to the movie, as long as you took it off once you were seated.

As you reach your seat, you take off your helmet. Your dad knells down to you and looks you in the eyes. He tells you that he'll be stepping out for a few minutes, but he'll be right back. He tells you that he counts on you to be a good boy and stay there. You nod in agreement, somehow not really caring what he is saying to you. The only thing that matters to you right now is the movie and the fact that it's about to start.

The movie starts and he is not back. You try to not care about that, try to concentrate on the picture, try to loose yourself in the movie. It nags at you, but you manage to push it back.

At the end of the movie, he's still not back. You wait for a little while, trying to concentrate on the end credits, but your attention wanders a bit. When the men come in to sweep the floor, you try to hold back the tears, telling yourself that he'll be back any moment now.

And he does. He finally shows up. He hugs you and apologizes. He promises that he won't ever do it again and tells you that if you don't tell anyone, he'll take you to the movies every week.

And he does.

- * -

Shaking. The picture in your hand is shaking. The bat that you're holding in your other hand slips from your grasp, but you catch it at the last second before it hits the floor. You can feel your palms, feel the sweat that has built up in them. You put the picture back in the bookcase and try to calm yourself. You take a few deep breath and try to ignore the too-ripe odor of your own body. You tell yourself that if there is no one in the house you'll take a shower, a bath. You'll wash the fear away from your skin.

You start to head towards the door and you stop again. You head to the front door and put your hand on the knob. Still unlocked. You look for the catch and slide it into place. A small thug at the know lets you know that the door is now indeed locked. If there is anyone in the place, they are now your prisoner. If you're alone, you're your own prisoner. Like always.

You head once again for the door and this time, you actually reach the door. You try to steady your hand as it reaches the door and turn the handle.

- * -

Thunder. The sound echoes in your room, the wind from the storm gently rattling your bedroom window. It's not the storm outside that wakes you, but rather the end of the storm inside that does. You blink, rub your eyes and try to figure out what time it is. All you know is that when your dad got home tonight, he seemed angry. That's when your mom started yelling at him, making him angrier. He looked at you and sent you to your room even though you had done nothing. You hadn't even told the secret to anyone.

You could hear them yelling at each other for a long while. You fell asleep, hugging Mr Brown to your chest. Mr Brown was your only friend in time like these, the only one who understood you and your world.

When you awoke, there was no more noise in the house. You made your way to your door, still clutching Mr Brown in your left hand. You opened the door, trying to make as little noise as possible. You peered out, seeing nothing as the rest of the house was also dark. You stepped out of the room into the corridor and made your way towards the living room, towards your parents' room.

When you got to the living room, you knew something was wrong. The room was dark like the rest of the house and your parents' door was slightly ajar. You could hear some noise coming from over the couch and you could see a pair of feet sticking out from over the side. You made your way slowly towards the couch, trying hard not to make any noise.

As you got closer, you could see the shape of your dad sleeping on the couch, a series of angry red marks on his cheek. His hair was messy and he was still dressed. As you got closer, you could see that his shirt was ripped in a few places and you could hear him snoring loudly.

You turned around and slowly made your way to the bedroom. You pushed the door open, still trying to be quiet. You could see the shape of your mom under the covers. She laid very still.

- * -

Slick. The knob feels slick and cold in your hand. You're very nervous and are unsure why. You've done this hundreds of time back when you were over the pond and hundreds more since the accident. Why does this feel different? It's not like you're actually gonna hurt them. You've never hurt anyone who actually cooperated. If they listened, if they understood who was the boss, everything always went smoothly.

You open the door and see the shapes in their bed. They're just lying there, as if without a care in the world. You could make sure right now that they never had a care in the world again. You could end it all for them, send them to a better place. They would never notice, never awaken to know that it was all over. But you don't. You won't. Why should they have peace when you don't?

You step back and close the door. Maybe you'll be able to find some rope or something else to tie them down.

You leave to go exploring. If you don't make any noise, you'll be back before they awaken.

- VII-

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL HALLWAY. NIGHT.

Cary stood at the door dumbfounded. He could not help but stare at the woman who had opened the door. He assumed that she was indeed Old Sally, although she could not be much more than 10 years his senior. He could suddenly feel the wrinkles atop his hands, his face, his entire body. Even more, he knew that he knew Sally from somewhere. Exactly where, he could not say right now. She had been either a friend of his parents, someone he went to school with or something. If only he could remember...

Sally
(To Cary)

You just gonna stare at me or you gonna come in? Either way, I don't care which side of the door you're standing at. I just want to close the door against this darn cold.

Cary
(To Sally)

[Snapping out of his daze] Oh, yes, yes. I'm coming in.

Sally turned around and shuffled away. Cary walked in and closed the door behind him. There was not much light in the corridor, so he could barely make out what the house looked like. He stood for a few seconds, trying to see where everything was and gave up. He followed Sally.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL RECEPTION AREA. NIGHT.

Sally was already standing behind the counter and was busy writing in a book. Cary came up to the counter and could see that the book was a standard hotel ledger, where Sally was busy writing the details of Cary's stay. While she was busy filling in the forms, he kept on looking at her, as if by letting his eyes glide over her wrinkled skin, her white hair, her housecoat, he could somehow penetrate the mystery of where he had met her before.

Sally
(looking at the ledger)

So, you're here for the funeral too, huh?

Cary

Oh yes, yes I am. [looking around nervously] Can I ask you a question? [without waiting for an answer] How did you know I was coming?

Sally

[She is still filling in the ledger] You called me three days ago to make a reservation. I don't get many of those anymore. And your wife called also a few hours ago to see if you'd gotten yourself lost. She almost sounded like she expected you to be lost...

Cary

Oh. I guess that make sense. [Rubbing the back of his neck] Do you need me to pay right away? Do you want to see my driver's or some other piece of ID?

Sally

[She looks up] Nope. That's ok, I know you.

Cary

Really? I thought you looked familiar, but for the life of me...

Sally

[Smiling] Oh, I know you alright. And I knew your parents. I even remember seeing you naked on quite a few occasions...

Cary

[Embarrassed] But I... I mean, apart from Joan...

Sally

[Laughing at him] Get you mind out of the gutter, mister! [She smiles] I didn't think you'd remember your old babysitter. I like to kid myself and say that I haven't changed that much, but obviously [She gives a little laugh] Anyway, you've changed quite a bit yourself. [She teases him] Your skin used to be smoother too...

Cary

[Blushes] I guess we all age. [Somewhat more somber, almost to himself] And we do change, sometimes not in the way we thought we would.

Sally

[She coughs slightly] Haven't seen you around since the last funeral. That was what? 10 years ago? Your mom, right?

Cary

Yeah, my mom was the last to go. My dad died a few years before. You never think that they'll go, but then one day you realize that they're not as strong as they used to be and the next thing you know...

Sally

Yeah. And here you are again, another funeral. It's strange now that I think about it. You've only come back to the village for funerals. It's like you're the last chapter in these people's life.

Cary

I dunno. After the service, there seems very little to bring me back here. What with my job, Joan and little Anny... There never seemed to be enough time.

Sally

I know what you mean. Life overwhelms you and the next thing you know, it's time for another funeral. It's life's way of telling you to slow down, I guess...

Cary

Yeah. [somber, once again] I guess that's the best way of seeing it. It tends to put things in perspective. Makes a man takes stock of what he did and what he'll do.

Sally

[Taken aback] Well, I'll assume that you'd be wanting to lay down, right about now. I better give you your key and let you go up. Your room is the first door, just up the stairs.

Cary

[Takes the key] Thanks. Yeah, I'm a little tired. I guess we can catch up later. [Turns around, heading for the stairs. Stops, as if suddenly remembering something. He turns back to Sally] You wouldn't have a phone that I can use, would you? I should call Joan to let her know that I'm alright.

Sally

Sure thing. Just use this phone here.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL RECEPTION AREA. NIGHT.

Sally had put the phone on the counter and turned it towards Cary. She smiled at him and turned around, as much to give him privacy as to head off to bed herself. As Cary reached the phone, she turned her head slightly, smiled at him one last time and gave him a little wave. She headed off in the darkness, presumably towards her room and her bed.

Cary took the phone in his hand and brought it to his ear. He looked at the dial for a few seconds, as if to divine his phone number. He looked at the open ledger, read the phone number upside down and dialed.

The phone rang. He waited for 4 rings and was about to hang up when someone finally answered.

Voice

[Woken from a deep sleep] Hello?

Cary

[Unsure] Joan? Is that you?

Male Voice

[Miffed. A female voice can be heard in the background]
No, this is not Joan. This is Tom. What do you want with my wife?

Cary

[Surprised] Oh, sorry. I must have the wrong number. I was trying to reach Joan Dick.

Male Voice

[Suspicious] That's Joan's name alright. What did you say your name was?

Cary hung up the phone. His hands were shaking, although he was unsure why. If anyone should be nervous, it was Joan, if indeed she was cheating on him. But why was she? And why would she let her lover sleep over, especially since she knew he'd be calling her. It must have been a mistake, a wrong number, a weird coincidence. But what were the odds?

Cary tried to calm himself, to steady his nerves. He looked around and spotted a bar. He made his way towards it.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL BAR AREA. NIGHT.

Once at the bar, Cary went around and to the back of the bar. He quickly located a bottle of bourbon and an empty glass that looked reasonably clean. He pour himself a stiff shot, drank it down in one gulp. He poured himself a second one.

Why would Joan cheat on him? She never gave him any indication that she was unhappy, that something was missing from their life. Even at their age, their sex life had been an active one, and, on the rare occasions that he did talk about this kind of stuff with the guys, he noticed that his sex life was way more active than any of his friends. As far as he knew, they loved each other very much and he wasn't shy about showing it and neither was she.

Who was that man with Joan? Was it someone he knew or was it someone that Joan knew from her daily life, from her circle of friends?

Downing the bourbon and pouring himself a third one, Cary tried to relax. He half-made his mind to call back, to ask and get answers from the man on the phone, but then he changed his mind. He downed the last shot and resolved to go to bed. He would call back tomorrow and see what was happening. This couldn't be happening, something was wrong, something was off.

Cary put the glass in the sink behind the bar and made his way for the stairs.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL CARY'S ROOM. NIGHT.

Cary got to his room, feeling dazed from the combination of fatigue, bad news and alcohol. He took off his jacket and noticed a bulge in his pocket that he hadn't noticed before. He reached inside and pulled out a gun.

I finally arrived at Suzie's. The front porch light was off, as were all the lights in the place. If I didn't know better, I would have believed that no one lived there. I walked up the gravel path to the door and up the stairs. Just when I was about to knock, it occurred to me that her parents would not take my presence very well. I went back down the stairs, made my way around the house and up to Suzie's window.

It wasn't the first time that I had stood outside her window at night, just looking in. I could never really see her, but would imagine her sleeping face in my mind. Now, I'm not a pervert or a freak. It's not like I got off watching her. Hell, I couldn't even see her! It's just that it would comfort me to think of her sleeping, being at peace. There is something about watching people sleep, without a care in the world, that makes me feel like everything will be alright.

I must have stood there for a good ten minutes before I worked up the nerve to knock at the window and wake her up. I mean, so many things could go wrong, and that didn't even include the fact that I still had no idea what to tell her. Would she be happy to see me? Would she be mad, positive that I was some sort of pervert and that I wished her harm or something? From the corner of my eye I could see a light going on upstairs at Sally's. It must have been the person who was checking in earlier. I hadn't seen a car outside her place which led me to believe that it must have been his car that I stole earlier.

The thought that the person's whose car I had taken was so close to me made me hesitate once more. I started to panic, thinking about just throwing the keys at Sally's door and going back home. I was afraid that if I stood here for too long, someone might connect my presence and the missing car. Of course, that was completely ridiculous since no one had seen me in the car or knew that I had the keys on me. On the other hand, there wasn't that many people awake at this time of the night so I guessed that it made me a suspect.

A curious notion came over me. What if I was to go and peek in the window of the second floor, and see what the owner of the car looked like? They say you can learn a lot from a person's car, but I wasn't sure how true that was. I mean, the car I had taken was almost brand new, with its shining bonnet and clean interior. Was the owner some sort of playboy, driving around trying to impress the ladies or was he some obsessive compulsive type who is never happy unless everything is in perfect order? Was he old or really young? Was it his first car, bought after having saved up for years or was it a last stab at youth by some old man? I was really tempted but then I looked again at Suzie's window and kidded myself that I could see her face, could see her shifting ever so slightly in her bed.

I turned back to her window and took a deep breath. I still had no idea what I would say, but knocked anyway. Better plunge in head first than try and be reasonable. After all, wasn't it impulse that brought me here in the first place, made me steal that car? The worse that could possibly happen would be that she wouldn't wake up. I knocked at the window and waited.

Just when I was about to knock again, I saw a shape coming to the window. I stepped back, clenching my hands, my fingernails digging in my sweaty palms. My mouth had suddenly gone dry. The window opened and I could see Suzie's sleepy face staring at me.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" she said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. "What time is it?"

"Huh, hi! I was, well this is gonna sound crazy, but I was just wondering what you were doing right now?" I said. As the words were leaving my mouth, I knew I sounded like a damn fool, but I couldn't stop them from tumbling out.

"I was sleeping, doofus. It's..." she looked back into her room, "it's 3 o'clock in the morning. Of course I was sleeping!"

"Yeah, I knew that. I meant to ask you if you wanted to come for a car ride with me..." I told her, trying to sound a little more self-assured that I really was.

"Car? Since when do you have a car?"

"Well, let's just say that I found one when I was walking outside about an hour ago. The keys were inside so I figured..."

"Oh! You mean you stole a car?" She looked at me with her eyes. I wasn't sure if she was just surprised or if she was disappointed in me. One thing for sure, she was wide awake now.

"I didn't really steal it. I'll return it, I swear. I just... I don't know why, but I just felt like... It just felt right. When I sat in that car, it was like it was waiting for me. The seat, the steering wheel... they just felt right in my hands. And besides, if the owner did not want it to be stolen, what business did he have leaving it in the middle of the road, with the keys still in the ignition?" I was babbling and I knew it. I was just hoping that I didn't sound too much like a big kid and rather like a rebellious youth. Not that James Dean ever sounded like that in the movies, but I could still hope that I looked somewhat cool to Suzie.

"Hmm..." she just stood in the window, staring at me. It felt like she was trying to assess exactly how cool I was and whether or not it was worth it to follow me in the night.

"Well, fine. Give me a minute so I can dress and fix my hair. Just stay there. And no peeking while I dress!" She closed the window and disappeared in the darkness.

I turned around and fell back against the wall. I slid down until I was sitting. My heart was beating furiously, like a badly tuned engine, and my hands were so sweaty. I brought them close to my face to look at them and I could see, in the moonlight, little red crescents where the fingernails had bitten. I took a few deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. I had done it! I had finally asked Suzie out. Yes, it was in the middle of the night. Yes, it was to go on a ride in a stolen car, but still! She had said yes and she was coming with me.

In case I hadn't made myself clear from the start, I had the biggest crush on Suzie. Of course, so did every other red-blooded boy in high school. How could we not? Suzie was by far the most attractive, most intelligent girl in school. What with her pretty face, pert nose, nice short black hair. Yes, she had the body of a goddess, but what's more is that she didn't make a huge deal out of it. She would talk to everyone, she would smile at anyone who would smile at her.

Eventually I heard the window open once again. I quickly rolled out of the way and stood up just in time to see Suzie climbing out of the window. I helped her down, careful not to put my hands anywhere they were not wanted. Once out, she closed the window and turned to me.

"Well," she said, a huge smile on her face "let's do this!"

I could tell she was really excited. She had put on a pink t-shirt with a black hoodie atop. With her black pants and black sneakers, she looked for the world like a juvenile delinquent, not at all like the little miss perfect that I encountered every day in school.

"What? You don't like the outfit?" she teased.

"No, no! I'm just not used to seeing you this way..." I blurted.

"Well, it's not every day that some cool guy comes knocking at my window in the middle of the night to invite me for a joyride."

"Yeah..." somehow, my brain got caught on the words "cool guy". I didn't really hear or register anything else after. All was right with the world. She had called me a cool guy.

We started walking back towards the car. When we got close to the Diner, I stopped her.

"Let's go around the Diner. Hank is sleeping under the tree and I don't want him to see us together."

"Why? Are you ashamed of being seen with me?" she teased once more.

"No..." I blushed. "It's not that. If he sees us together, he'll tell people for sure. If he saw me alone, he wouldn't care. He's seen me many times at the Diner and he saw me earlier on. It's nothing special. But if he saw me with you, then it would be special. I wouldn't want you to get in trouble..."

"Oh, my hero! Come whisking me away in the middle of the night, but still defending my honor!" she laughed at me.

"Well, you do have a much better reputation than me and I wouldn't want to go and ruin it..."

"Yeah... whatever." she said.

I looked at her. For some reason, she looked pissed when I told her the thing about her reputation. I was confused, unsure of what to say, so I just looked forward and kept on walking. I figured that if I waited for a few moments, I could restart the conversation about anything and hope that that awkward moment had passed.

We walked around the block, far from the Diner and the tree where Hank was sleeping. The night had gotten a little colder so I zipped up my hoodie against the cold and crammed my hands in my pockets.

I could see in the corner of my eyes that Suzie had stopped frowning and she was smiling again. She looked at me from the corner of her eyes.

"So, do I have to grab your hand or are you gonna do it? Don't you know a gal's hand can get quite cold in weather like this?"

I stopped walking for a second. She just kept going. I ran a little after her and took her hand.

Her hand was so small in mine and so soft. I could feel my heart beating even faster than it was before and for a second, I thought I was going to get a cardiac arrest if I didn't dehydrate from sweating too much first. I tried stammering a few words, but stopped, figuring that I would appear cooler if I didn't say anything.

"So, where is this car of yours? I hope that it wasn't just a story to get me out of my house..."

"No, no. We're almost there. I parked it under a tree, just outside of town. You see, I didn't want to come back into town with it. I was afraid of getting caught..."

"By whom? It's not like the police patrols this time of night. I should know. My dad is fast asleep at this time. Sure, if someone calls him, he'll go and check it out, but most of the time, he sleeps as well and as long as me..."

Somehow it had slipped my mind that her dad was the town's only police officer. Not that it mattered now, but as my dad always said: "if you're gonna get in trouble, might as well make sure it's worth it..."

"If I had taken the car earlier, we could have gone to the movies. I heard there's a John Wayne double-feature at the drive-in." I said in an effort to change the conversation.

“Ooh... the drive-in. Now I know that your intention are not pure, mister. I've heard stories about that place...” she said, smiling.

“Huh... no, it's not that. I just like John Wayne and...”

“So, am I not attractive, is that what you're saying? You don't want me?” she continued teasing me.

“Yes! No! What? Hang on... you're doing it on purpose... and beside, if you didn't like me, you wouldn't be here.” I said, throwing sense and coolness to the wind. I figured, if she could keep me off balance, the best way to deal would be to do the same.

She didn't reply. She just lowered her head and smiled.

We walked in silence for the next little while, until we got to the car.

“You weren't kidding. Do you have the keys?” she said.

I pulled the keys from my pocket and showed them to her. I pointed to the car.

“Shall we?”

“Definitively.”

“Where to?”

“Hmm... let me think. What's a lady with a reputation to do at a time like this? I know! Let's go make-out on the mountain...”

I almost dropped the keys.

- IX -

Bile. You try to swallow and get the taste of bile out of your mouth. You stop for a second, try to slow down your heart rate. You're not sure why, but you're nervous. It's not like the first time you've done this after all. Is it the picture that's doing this to you? Why is it affecting you so much?

You get to the kitchen and look around. The sight of the refrigerator brings a new wave of nausea with it, but this time you know it's simply because you haven't eaten in a while. Your stomach is already revolting against the idea of eating food even though your conscious brain hasn't even conceived of it yet. You push away the idea of eating for now and try to concentrate on finding some rope. You'll eat eventually, but not before tying them up. And maybe shooting up also.

You look and you can see two other doorways in the room, apart from the one you came from. One of them, the one closest to the kitchen table, has a door and it probably leads to the basement. The other one shows stairs going up, probably to the second floor. You decide to go up first, to check if there are other people in the house.

You take the stairs slowly, trying real hard not to make them creak. Back over the pond, you learned to move like a cat, never making any noise. You learned quickly that making noise in the bush was a sure way to get yourself killed or even worse, get the others in your platoon killed. So after having seen one guy in your platoon shot in the back by Jon-boy, simply because he had made noise and warned the enemy of your position, you learned to be real careful. It's one thing to get killed by someone you expect, quite something else to be shot in the back by one of yours.

You make it to the top of the stairs without making any noise and come against a door. Very careful you try the knob, to see if it's locked. It is. You try to force the door a bit, trying hard not to make any noise, but the door feels solidly locked. You press your ear against the door, trying to ear if there's someone on the other side but you can't hear anything.

You make your way back down the stairs.

- * -

Salt. You can taste the salty tears running down your face, but they're not yours. You've sometimes wished you could express yourself the way she does, openly and without shame, but you've never been able to. So you rub your face against her when she cries so that you can feel the tears down your face, so that you can steal some of the sadness she has.

It's not that you don't feel sad, it's just that you don't show it, can't show it. Why is that? You figure it probably has something to do with your parents, but you try not to think about it. Besides, it doesn't matter now, all that matters is her and the fact that you're leaving her.

You just came back from the recruiting center and you passed all the tests. They've told you to show up the day after tomorrow because they're shipping you off to a military base for your training. This is something you're telling yourself you always wanted. This is what you're telling her also.

You knew she wouldn't take it so well. You knew that you'd be breaking her heart by telling her you joined the Forces. But she'll get over it. There's so many other boys madly in love with her, you're sure one of them will treat her better than you'll ever be able to.

Since you broke the news to her, neither of you have said anything. The only sound you can hear is the sound of her sobbing. And then it stops and she tries talking to you.

It takes her a few tries, but she finally gets the words out. At first, they are words of frustration, of accusation. Then, the words become words of supplication before becoming words of accusation and frustration again when you don't answer. Then she tells you that she loves you, that she can't love anyone else. This is when she lays it all on the line: that since she wouldn't be living without you in her life that she will end it all if you leave. You almost say something, but you can't. Because you don't know what to say. Because you don't have the words to say. Because you don't know how to do it.

You've seen your parents fight as long as you've lived. You know that while things might be perfect now, they will never stay perfect. Because this is what your loving parents have taught you over the years, that although there might have been love at one point, all that remains after a few years is pain and suffering, people who are too weak to just walk away and admit defeat.

Nonetheless you break. You start talking to her. At first, she doesn't even listen to you and just starts screaming louder at you. She pushes away and takes a swat at your face. You blink, stop and just look at her. When she appears to calm down a bit, you start talking again. She starts yelling at you again, so you scream back. She stops, surprised to see you show so much emotion. You tell her that it's the way it has to be. Your country needs you and you need to do this. For yourself, for her, for everything around her.

She breaks down again and starts crying. You figure that maybe you should make her happy, tell her you'll marry her. It's not like you expect to come back from the war anyway. At least she'll be happy for a little while. So you tell her, ask her. She stops crying, stares at you. She tries to figure out if you're lying to her, if you're just trying to screw with her. But you tell her that no, you're honest, you really want to marry her.

You've never seen her smile like this before. And her smile melts your heart.

For the first time since you can remember, you start to cry. At least the smile makes it look like you're happy.

- * -

Water. You can taste water and it takes you a few seconds to notice that you're crying. For the life of you, you have no idea why you're crying. It's not like you're sobbing uncontrollably, but you can feel small tears coming off the corners of your eyes. You wipe your eyes and look around the kitchen a bit.

You find all the standard items you'd expect to find, but you can't see any rope. The lack of light doesn't help, but you're fairly sure there's no rope here. You look at the other door and decide to go exploring.

You try the doorknob and the door opens easily. There's a stairway going down, but if anything, it's even darker down there than up here. You feel against the walls and find a light switch. You hesitate for a second, thinking of snapping it on, but you figure you'd better get on the other side of the door first. Don't want to wake up the people in the other room.

You move to the top stair, keeping your hand against the wall, near the switch. You close the door and wait for a second. You can't hear anything and the musty, dusty smell tells you that there's probably no one living in the basement. You've slept in worse places than this, but you had an excuse, you didn't have a real house. You take a deep breath and snap the light on.

All you can see is the stairs going down into a dirty, dank basement. You make your way, careful not to knock anything down. There's stacks of boxes everywhere, each one filled with items that was worth keeping at the time, but that's now completely forgotten. You open a few of them, looking for the rope.

You come across the typical items: books of photos, old clothes, some knick knacks. One of the boxes contains an old teddy bear, beaten up, with one eye barely there, held by a thread. You take it in your hands and stare at it for a few moments. Just as the memories start to rise up in your mind, you force them back down. You don't have time for this.

You put the bear back in the box, telling yourself that once you get the rope, there'll be time to explore. You look around and you spot a shelf unit, with some tools on it. You go over and check it out. You find exactly what you were looking for on a shelf.

You go back upstairs and decide to deal with the people who live here.

- * -

Dirt. You can taste it, grit between your teeth. You knew the training would be hard, but you never thought you would eat this much dirt. The days are long and the night really short. The training is almost complete, so you don't really care. Soon, you'll be off to the war, and nothing will matter anymore.

You can hear them, the others, talking behind your back. They talk tough and make fun of you, of the fact that you're the skinniest guy they've ever seen. One of them openly laughed at you the other day, but he lived to regret it when you jumped on him. You might be skinny, but it took three guys to pull you off of him.

When you felt the meat of his body against your fists, it felt good. It felt good to let go of all that frustration, of the shit you had to deal with everyday. It wasn't just the pressure of the training that was getting to you, but also the pressures from the outside. You had married just before being shipped out and she had insisted on following you. You didn't want that, you wanted her to stay home, in the village. She fought you but in the end you won. The problem is, she kept on sending you letters everyday and you could feel her getting more and more desperate. You sometimes feared for her life, but then you told yourself that she would be alright, that with time she would forget.

Then, a few days before the fight, you got a letter where she told you she was pregnant. You didn't want that, but you couldn't tell her to get an abortion. You already had enough to deal with without having someone else to be responsible for. But what could you do? You sent back a letter telling her you were happy and all the while you were feeling more and more pressure.

So you beat up the dumbfuck that called you skinny. You beat him up real good. You could feel every single blow up your arms. You could taste his fear as he looked into your eyes. You could even taste the drops of blood that went flying off his face, your fist, and it felt right. It felt good.

For that fight, you spent a week in the brig, while he spent a month in the hospital. Your CO yelled at you and threaten to discharge you, but in the end, you knew they would keep you on.

Now the other soldiers respect you, or maybe it's just fear. One thing for sure, they don't mock you anymore, at least not to your face.

- * -

Blood. The thought of blood brings you back to your task at hand. You can feel the coarseness of the rope in your hand. You loop it three times in your left hand, keeping the right one free.

Your right hand opens the door quietly. You look at the people sleeping in the room and wonder how can they be so oblivious to what is about to happen to them. You walk forward slowly, in a low crouch, ready to jump forward if one of them so much as moves.

As you get close to the bed, that's when you notice that something is wrong. Neither of the sleepers are moving. You get a little closer and notice a sheen on the sheets.

You get closer still. You reach and touch the sheen. It's sticky. You turn around and go back to the door and look for the light switch. You flick the lights on and look at your finger and can see blood there. You turn around and look at the bed.

Someone was here before you. The bed is drenched in blood.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL CARY'S ROOM. NIGHT.

As Cary held the gun in his hands, he started shaking. He turned it over a few times, trying to feel the cold steel, to feel the weight in his hands. He gripped it by the stock and let his finger caress the trigger.

Opening the rotating magazine, he could see that there were bullets in all the chambers. He spun the magazine a few times and then shook out the bullets in his hands. He could not remember when the last time he handled bullets was. The shells felt warm in his hands, like the fingers of a child on a hot summer day.

He went to put the bullets in his pocket, but changed his mind. Closing his hand over the five bullets, he shook them like dice in his hand. He stopped, opened his hand again, took one bullet into his other hand and put the other four in his jacket pocket. He chambered that bullet, closed the magazine and gave it a few spins.

Putting down the gun on the bed, Cary took out his wallet. He pulled out a photo of Joan and him, standing in front of their house, with little Anny standing in front of them. All of them smiled a bright, wide smile and they were, ironically, the very picture of happiness.

Cary
(To himself)

How could you, Joan? How could you cheat on me, with Anny in the house? Did you make her call him daddy or did you make her sleep in some other stranger's house? How could you let a stranger in our house and let him sleep in our bed?

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL CARY'S ROOM. NIGHT.

Without looking at the picture, Cary put it back in his wallet and the wallet back in his pocket. He stood up again, putting his jacket back on. He took the gun from the bed and put it back in his jacket pocket.

He headed for the door of his room, opened the door and went downstairs.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL RECEPTION AREA. NIGHT.

Cary looked around the reception area. The lights were off and he could only see the silhouette of the front desk under the light of the full moon outside. As he let his eyes get used to the lack of light, he listened to the darkness. There were no sounds in the room, only the sound of his breathing. It was as if he was alone in the world and right now, he really felt that way.

As he was about to make his way to the front door, he stopped. He looked back at the bar, though about grabbing the bottle of bourbon for the road and changed his mind. As he looked at the bar, the telephone atop the front desk came across his sight. The conversation earlier came back to him and he tried to decide then and there if it had indeed been a wrong number.

Patting the bulge in his pocket that was the gun, he made his way back to the front desk. He went behind the desk and turned on the small work light that was sitting near the phone. As he picked up the phone and put it to his ear, his hand hesitated over the dial. Once more, he could not remember his number, so he opened the ledger and looked for his name and number.

Old Sally wasn't kidding when she had told him earlier that she didn't get many reservations lately. The latest entry apart from him had been a few months before. He looked at the name and did not recognize it. He shrugged and found his name on the page. As he looked across the line at his phone number, he noticed that the numbers had been smudged. He bent down and stared at the numbers, trying to divine some meaning in them. As he stared at them, he remembered the numbers he had dialed earlier on.

Fingers shaking slightly, he started dialing.

Cary

(To himself)

[Under his breath] Well, here goes nothing. [He listens to the phone ringing. It rings four times]

Female voice

[Cold, mechanical voice]The number you have dialed is no longer in service...

Cary hung up the phone. He looked down at the phone number in the ledger again, trying to make sense of the smeared numbers on the page. He reached for the phone, hand poised over the dial once more and gave it a second try.

Cary heard the same voice, telling him again that the number he had tried to reach was no longer in service. He tried a few more combination of numbers, with the same result every time.

He slammed the phone down in frustration and went to the bar.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL BAR AREA. NIGHT.

Cary made his way behind the bar and looked for the bottle of bourbon. Locating it quickly, he grabbed it, and started to walk away from the bar. Stopping, he looked at the bottle.

Cary

(To the bottle)

[Under his breath] Looks like it's you and me, kiddo. Hope you're ready for a long drive.

He opened the bottle and took a swig. Capping the bottle, he then proceeded to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL HALLWAY. NIGHT.

Cary made his way to the front door. He opened the inside door and tried to open the front door. It was locked. He reached for the lock but, as he groped in the darkness, he could not locate the lock. He tried opening the door a few more times, shaking the door without opening it.

He took a deep breath, squared his shoulder to the door and was about to shoulder it open when the lights came on.

Sally

[Scolding, as if talking to a small child]What the hell do you think you're doing, young man?

Cary

[Startled] What does it look like? I'm trying to leave but the door seems to be locked from the outside or something.

Sally

[Slightly angry] Darn right the door is locked. If my guests leave, I want to be there to see them off...

Cary

[Defiant] Well, I do want to leave. I... I need to take care of a few things back home.

Sally

Really? In the middle of the night?

Cary

What's it to you? What difference does it make? If you just want me to pay for my stay, I will even though I wasn't here very long.

Sally

That's not the point. You shouldn't leave right now. It's the middle of the night and you need to sleep. Also, you look a little drunk and it wouldn't be responsible for me to let you leave in that state. You might get into an accident or something.

Cary

[Sarcastic] Well, if you don't mind too much, I'll take my chances. I'm old enough to make my own decisions.

Sally

[Shaking her head] You haven't changed a bit. Even when I babysat you, you used to take off in the middle of the night. You never figured that I knew about it, but I did. And so did your parents. God knows what you were up to during that time.

Cary

[Getting angry] Good for you. Now open the door so that I can leave. [He puts his hand in his pocket and grabs hold of the gun's stock.]

Sally

No. You should really go back to your room and get some sleep. There's no problem so big that it can't wait. Your head will be clearer and everyone will be safer.

Cary

[Pulls out the gun and points it at Sally. He's yelling]I said, open the goddamn door. Now.

Sally

[Stares him down]What if I refuse? You'll shoot me? And then what? You still won't have your car, so you won't be able to leave the town anyway, not that you know where you are.

Cary

[He cocks the gun]Shut up and do it now.

Sally

[Calm]Go ahead. Shoot me.

Cary

[He is visibly very pissed off. A large vein on his forehead is pulsing and he is red, sweaty.]Goddamn you. [He pulls on the trigger. A click is heard, but no shot rings out. As soon as his finger squeezes the trigger, his face crumbles. He falls to his knees, dropping the gun.]Oh my god. What have I done?[he starts weeping in his hands.]

Sally

[She walks slowly towards him. She kneels down besides him and starts patting his back gently]There, there. Nothing happened. Everything is fine, no one is hurt. Come with me.

Taking Cary gently by the arm, Sally got up and guided him back towards the reception area. Cary was still crying softly, mumbling to himself. He did not resist the pull of his old babysitter as she tried soothing him.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

Sally guided Cary to an old couch that was sitting underneath a plate glass window. A beautiful view of the outskirts of town could be seen from the window, the silhouettes of the trees and houses playing at being Chinese shadows. If one was to stare at them too long, one could easily imagine little silhouette people coming out of the houses and pretend to go about their ordinary live. Cary saw nothing of this, his eyes being full of tears, his heart of bile and anger.

As Sally made Cary sit on the couch, she sat with him. She stroked his head for a few seconds, flattening the rebellious tufts of hair with her hand, all the while tutting to him. As he started to cry softly once more, she pulled him to his breast and started to rock him gently. Seeing the bottle of bourbon in his pocket, she pulled it out gently and, passing it from one hand to the other, she deposited it on the floor, then pushed it under the couch with her feet.

Sally
(To Cary)

[Gently, as one talking to a small child]Tell me what the problem is... Who's been mean enough to put you in this state.

Without answering her questions, Cary pulled away from Sally and looked her in the eyes. He reached into his pocket once more and pulled out his wallet. Opening it, he pulled out the picture of his wife and kid.

Cary

[Trying not to sob]She. She's the one. I don't know why she's doing this to me...

Sally

[Looking at the picture]Who? Honey, apart from the scratches, there's no one else on this picture.

Cary took the picture back from Sally, an incredulous look on his face. He stared at the picture, but try as he might, he could no longer see Joan or little Anny. All that was there, on either side of him were scratches, in the vaguest form of bodies.

I froze on the spot, the keys dangling from my hand. Suzie didn't noticed, or at least if she did, she didn't let on. She simply hopped on to the passenger side and waited for me. When she got there, she half-turned to me and I swear I could see a slight, nervous smile playing on her lips.

"Well? Are we going or not?" she said.

That snapped me out of it and I walked quickly to the driver side. I opened the door, got in and slid over to unlock the door for her. She got in.

I could not help but stare at her as she was sitting beside me. She just kept on staring straight ahead.

"Do you seriously want to do this?" I said, although I was afraid of the answer.

"What do you think? I don't just follow every boy that comes to my window in the middle of the night" she answered.

It was at this time that figured that her playful manner hid a very nervous interior. She was probably as nervous as I was, simply showing it in a different manner. A great smile washed over my features at this point and I became much calmer. This was really happening and nothing could go wrong from now on.

I slid the key into the ignition and started the car. The purring of the engine sent little shivers up my spine, adding to the magic of the moment. I put the car into drive and backed out from under the tree.

I started driving towards the mountain. We drove in silence since she admitted, indirectly, to liking me. I simply didn't know what to say and she seemed resolute to not break the silence by admitting further to liking me.

Suzie eventually got tired of looking out the window and started looking around the car. She still hadn't said anything since our exchange earlier. Her attention wandered over to the glove box.

"Hey, what do you know about the owner of this car?" she said.

"Nothing, really. The car was just there, in the middle of the street. The keys were in the ignition so I figured..." I tried not looking at her when I spoke, pretending my attention was riveted to the road. Looking at her would have distracted me from driving and made me think about her lips and what we would do when we got to the lookout.

"I wonder if there's any kind of IDs in the glove box. Did you look in there yet?"

"Nope. To be honest, I tried not to touch anything else than the steering wheel. I haven't even looked in the back seat or the trunk."

She bent down and tried opening the glove box. When the handle refused to turn, she brought her face even closer to the box and tried again, this time with both hands.

"It looks like it's locked. And the keyhole looks really small. Is there a small key on the key chain?"

"No, there's only the ignition key. That key also opens the door, so maybe it opens the glove box as well" I said.

"Hmm... would you mind pulling over? I'd really like to know what's in the glove box. I mean, it must be important if the owner locked it, right?"

"Can't it wait until we get to the lookout?" I was feeling annoyed, although I wasn't sure why. Was I really that much in a hurry to get to the lookout and start making out with her or was I just annoyed that she had found something else to focus her attention on?

"Let's do this now. Please?" She turned to face me and pouted.

What can I say, I'm a sucker. I pulled over there and then. I took the key out of the ignition and handed it to her.

Suzie tried inserting the key into the glove box lock and it became evident that the key was too large to fit into the lock. Visibly irritated by this turn of events, she turned to me.

"Well? Aren't you going to check in the trunk to see if there's a crowbar or something? I really want to see what's in the box now" she said no longer amused.

"No. We shouldn't break it open. I've already took the poor guy's car, I really don't want to abuse it any further" I said, surprising myself by standing up to Suzie.

She glared at me for a few seconds and turned around to look out the window.

"Well, if you're not helping me with this thing, we might as well go. Take me back home."

I started to say something and then stopped. Was I really going to cave in just to get some action or was I going to stand for what I believed in? On the other hand, strong moral stand wasn't exactly one of my strong points tonight.

"Give me the key." I said to her.

"Here."

She tossed me the key without looking my way. I caught it at an awkward angle and the point of it dug into my palm, leaving a small mark to keep company to the red crescents that were still there from earlier. The key radiated with the warmth of her hands and I tried to make up my mind about what I should do. Was I really so weak as to bend simply because I could feel her warmth through a stupid key? Did I really care about this car, its owner? Why did I feel like this car was entrusted to my care when I simply stole it?

My hand went to the door handle and then stopped there. For what felt like an eternity, I just held in on the handle, trying to make up my mind. The problem was simple: I did not want to seem like I was caving in, but at the same time, I did not want to let this occasion pass. Who knew when another such occasion would come up. Who knew what could happen if this night kept on going my way.

So, doing what my heart and other less noble body parts dictated, I opened the door and stepped around the car to the trunk. I slipped the key in the lock and opened it.

"I don't see anything" I called out, although I was seeing a car jack just below a battered suitcase.

"Well, dig around. Maybe it's under the tire or something."

I pretended to dig around.

"Nope. Nothing. Not even a spare tire or anything. We better not get a flat else we'll be in real trouble" I called back, slightly ashamed of the elaborate lie.

"Fine" she called out, "just get back in the car."

I closed the trunk and walked back to the car. I got in, closed the door and slid the key back into the ignition. Putting the car back into gear, I started to drive down the road, towards the lookout once more.

"Was there anything in the trunk?" she asked, her voice once more honeyed.

"Not really. It's weird, you'd think there be some junk. I guess the car is really brand new" I lied.

"Maybe it's not some stranger's, but rather someone's from town."

"Why would you say that?"

"Well, wouldn't they have luggage in there if it was from someone out of town? You did say that you 'found' the car late tonight" she said, making those annoying quote moves with her hands.

"But who would buy a new car and leave it there?"

"I dunno" she said and turned away once more.

I kept my eyes on the road, trying to keep quiet and hoping that everything would be forgotten, that the moment would pass.

We drove in silence for what seemed like an eternity. It must have been the lateness or the fact that I'd never driven at night before, but before too long, I had to admit that I was completely lost. I had no idea whether or not I was going in the right direction or even if we were anywhere near the lookout.

It took me a little while to decide whether or not I was going to admit to Suzie that I had no idea where we were. Being lost was compounded by the very fact that if I kept on going for much longer, we'd run out of gas and the situation would be that much worse. So I waited until we came across a small turnoff or another road before saying anything.

"I'm just gonna pull over now. I have no idea where we are" I said.

"What?" she turned around, a look of panic crossing her face. "You better be kidding me. What do you mean we're lost?"

"Well, I figure we must be close to the lookout or at least the mountain, what with all that fog, but apart from that, I'm completely confused. Besides, we haven't come across any kind of turnoffs or anything, so I have no idea what happened."

"That's just great. I was really dumb to let you take me on a joyride. And to think that I was thinking of letting you get lucky with me."

I blushed. At that moment, the entire situation became quite surreal to me. First finding the car and then going to Suzie's and convincing her to come on the joyride. Getting lost on the road was just icing on the cake. I might never get lucky with Suzie, but I'd never forget this night now.

"Look, I'll just turn off here and see if we can find a house or something. Someone is bound to steer us back in the right direction."

"They better, but I have a feeling that we might not get a warm reception since it is after all 4:00 in the morning."

"Maybe we can come across a farmer that's getting up or something."

"A farmer in the mountain? You're even stupider than I thought."

Bang. That one hurt. I never thought that I would get to know Suzie really well until tonight and I was finding out more than I really wanted. As sweet as she could be, she could also be a cruel bitch. I had half a mind to just pull over and dump her on the side of the road, but the fact that her dad was the town's only cop kind of played in her favor and stopped me from dumping her ass.

I turned at the crossroad and started driving in the direction I thought the town was. Before long, the paved road turned into a gravel road and the trees started coming closer to the road. The trees were so close to the road that there was not enough room to turn the car around and going backwards wasn't a great idea either. I just kept going, hoping to come across an area where I could turn the car around.

That's when we came across the cabin. A bleak, little dirty cabin, with the trees surrounding it, huge hands with skeletal fingers, almost guarding it against the elements. I stopped the car and looked around, trying to see if there was any room to turn the car around.

It was really odd, as if the road simply ended there, with no real space to turn the car or do anything else than just get out. The fog was still present, close to the ground.

"Where the hell did you bring me?" she said, her eyes wide. "What is this place?"

"I wish I knew. I still can't turn the car around, so I guess we should go and check out the cabin. Maybe there's someone who lives there" I said, trying to sound confident.

"Fine, you get out. I'm staying in the car. I don't trust this place."

I got out of the car and made my way to the front door. I knocked and waited. Nobody came to the door. I went to the window and tried to see in but it was too grimy, covered in dirt and soot that must have been there for the last 15 years.

I went back to the door and knocked again. When there was no answer this time, I tried the door handle and was surprised when it turned. I pushed the door open but saw nothing inside, since most of the place was plunged in darkness. I went back to the car to tell Suzie what I had found. I got in and slid the key into the ignition.

"Well, looks like no one lives in there" I said, turning the key. The engine didn't start.

"Think you can turn the car around? Or are we gonna try and back out all the way?" she said to me.

"Shit. I guess we won't find out if I can back this thing out. It won't start."

"What? Oh, that's just great. Why the hell did I ever listen to you? I knew it was a bad idea."

"Shut up, will ya? Now we can either sleep in the car or go check things out in the cabin. Maybe there's a phone or something in there."

She just stared at me, gave an angry harrumph and climbed out of the car, slamming the door behind her. She went straight into the cabin.

I stared at her back as she vanished into the cabin and waited a bit. I wasn't sure I wanted to follow her in, not because I was scared but rather because I didn't know if I wanted to be anywhere near her right now. My dad once told me that you only really got to know people under stressful situations and I guess he was right. Before tonight, I had thought that Suzie was the perfect woman. Now I knew she was just like all the others: untrustworthy and a liar.

The lights went on in the cabin. I don't know if she had found a light switch or just a candle, but there was light in there and maybe, if we were lucky some wood and a stove. If I could get a fire going, it would make spending the rest of this night that much better. I didn't have to talk to Suzie in the cabin and, somehow, I was sure she was just going to ignore me anyway.

I was about to step out of the car when I decided to check the glove box again. I reached across the seats and grabbed the handle. I gave it a quick turn and it opened. Surprised, I opened the door completely and looked inside.

Sitting there, among maps and some other papers, was a gun, its barrel glistening from what little light was coming from the cabin. I took it in my hand, shaking slightly. I opened the barrel and looked inside, thinking that it couldn't be loaded. I was half right. There was one bullet in the chamber.

- XII -

Bright. The whole bed is covered in a mess of bright red blood, almost ridiculous in its intensity, like a bad Italian horror film from the 70s. You start to head for the bed, to see if maybe, perhaps, one of the sleepers is still alive, still breathing and then you stop. You bring your hand up, see the blood and all you can see is her.

- * -

Deafening. The sound of wailing is deafening as you panic. The damn horn won't stop, no matter how hard you hit it. You know she's behind you. You know that if you're in bad shape, she's also in bad shape, her little body sprawled in the back seat.

You don't want to turn around and check you're so afraid. You catch your head turning towards her a few time, but always you snap your head back, looking forward, fighting the sound of the horn, the seat belt around your shoulder, your waist.

Your hand grab fumble slip over the catch, trying to free yourself of the belt.

- * -

Acrid. There's an acrid smell in the air as you approach your mother. She's just lying there, unmoving. As you get closer, you notice that she is moving, shaking more precisely. You can hear her sobbing very gently.

As you get closer still, you reach out to touch her and she flinches. In that instant, you can see her face, black and blue. There are tears mixing in the wounds on her face.

You back away, unable to take your eyes off of her face, her pleading eyes.

- * -

Sticky. The blood on your hand is sticky. You bring your hand back down and look once more at the bed. You've seen worse in the war, bodies ripped in two, three, millions of chunks by an explosion, by machine gun fire, by machete, by sheer human cruelty, but somehow, this is worse.

You head towards the bed, unsure what to do. You know you did not do this, but somehow you do feel responsible, as if you were the one who had sliced their throat in their sleep.

You stop just close enough that, if you want to, you can turn the bodies around and examine their faces, see if their death was peaceful or if they struggled. You're not sure why this might make a difference to you, but it would, somehow.

All you need to decide right now is if you've actually still got the balls to look at a dead person in the face.

- * -

Slick. The photo paper feels slick in your hand. You can't help stare at it, its color garish but what it's showing calming. Last year, all you could think of when you thought of home was pressure, the child coming and you here, in hell. You might have married her for the wrong reasons, but when you get this picture, everything changes. She's not even in the picture, which makes it all the better. All you can see of her is her hand holding a child up. The child seems confused, not sure of what's happening but you can

see something of yourself in her eyes. The pink little face topped with a shag of black hair. Her little blue dress with the shining black shoes and little white socks.

The guys kid you about the picture, about how every moment you have you whip it out and loose yourself in it. Some of them make jokes about how you're going to wear it out by staring a the picture. At least they're talking to you, seem less scared of you than before. You're not sure that's a good thing but you don't care. All you know is that on the other side of the world there's a little girl that's waiting for her dad. And somehow, this makes all the difference in the world.

It comforts you, makes you feel warm inside. Just like when you push that junk in your veins.

- * -

Sweat. As your hand reaches for one of the bodies, you can feel sweat building on your palms, your forehead. You gently pull at the shoulder of the body of what appears to be a man, trying to turn it over without disturbing its deep sleep. The body flops easily towards you, its arm describing a gentle arc as it hits your hand. You flinch back and feel a burning sensation in the back of your throat as what little you've ingested in the shape of food in the last few days comes gushing out onto the bed.

The body lies there in front of you, its throat ripped out savagely as if by a large creature, a wolf or a large dog. Its eyes are closed and its face actually looks peaceful by stark contrast with the state of its throat. If someone was to cover up the neck area, the body could pass as a peaceful sleeper, apart maybe from the blood splattered around its face.

The little puddle of bile that you've spewed a few moments ago has actually cleaned up some of the blood, turning the area pinkish instead of garish red.

You take a few steps back, wiping your mouth with the back of your hand. You try spitting to clean your mouth of the taste but find that you don't have enough saliva in your mouth to do that. You turn around and walk out of the room, towards the kitchen.

- * -

Salt. You can taste the salt of tears on your lips and this time, they're your own. The whole way back, you were a nervous wreck on the plane, not only because you were thankful to finally get out of the hellhole that the war was, but also because you weren't sure about coming back home.

Some of the guys in your platoon had been nervous going over and coming back was easy for them. Not for you. Going over was easy, since you expected, wanted, to die. Coming back was hard because people expected lots of things from you and there was no easy way out, there was no chance that you'd die and still be a hero for it.

Coming back meant dealing with her and the child. You could not wait to hold your little girl in your arms, cuddling her and seeing her growing up. It was her you weren't sure about, how you were going to deal with her and her demands. Not that she had many when you were together or even when you were away. It was just that you were afraid that the relationship would end up like the one between your mom and dad.

And there was the matter of the little habit you picked up while oversea. She couldn't find out about that. If she did, she would take off with the kid, the only thing that kept you sane and alive while over there. Not that you'd blame her if she took off. Hell, you weren't even sure if you trusted yourself with the kid.

No. You'd have to find a way to kick the habit without her finding out.

- * -

Bitter. The taste of bile feels cloying and all you can taste is its bitterness. You stumble into the kitchen, flicking on the lights, no longer caring if you make noise. You go to the cupboard, rummage looking for a glass, anything that can, may, hold water. You find a bowl and you bring it quickly to the sink, filling it with water.

You drink the water, spitting it out, washing your mouth, like an animal who hasn't drank for days. As you try and swallow a little bit, it triggers another wave of nausea and you puke some more on the plates that sit, unclean, in the sink. At this point, all that's left in your stomach is pure bile. It hurts when your stomach heaves and you know that you'll need to eat something soon if you don't want to pass out, but the very thought of food is revolting to you, to your stomach.

You turn away from the sink and the smell of vomit and step over to the kitchen table. You pull out a chair and sit, dropping your head to the table, trying to see if you can actually catch a bit of sleep, trick your stomach, your head in forgetting that you're hungry.

- * -

Shit. The first time you saw a man die in combat, you could smell that familiar smell: shit and piss. All you could do was think back to that day when you found your mom, beaten to a pulp by your dad. The smell was the same, the smell of fear, of unwilling defecation, of bodily reaction beyond anyone's control.

That night when you found her, you hadn't been able to do anything else but go back to your room. You had no idea who had done that to her, but somehow, although you wanted to go up to your dad and cry tell yell at him what you had seen, you didn't. You sensed that he had something to do with this, that somehow he was responsible.

You went back and hugged Mr Brown the rest of the night, eventually falling asleep like only young children can do in moments of stress. You had nightmares that night, of large dogs or wolves coming sniffing around your place, eating beating hurting your mom, with your dad simply sitting there watching. You'd been in the dreams too, with your little BB gun, trying as you might to kill scare hurt shoo the dogs wolves away but to no avail.

The next morning when you stepped out of your room, your eyes rimmed black by the lack of sleep, of good sleep, you saw your father sitting at the dining table, eating his breakfast like nothing had happened. He's wearing a new shirt, ironed to perfection, all the creases in the right places. His hair is also perfectly coiffed and you can see a bandage on his cheek, hiding the scratches you saw there the night before. So, looking at him, you think that maybe it was all a bad dream, that nothing had really happened, but as you look around the room, you can't see your mom. You ask your dad if she's around, thinking again that maybe what you saw last night was just a bad dream, that nothing really happened. He tells you that she has a headache, that she's still sleeping. You get up, heading for her door, to talk to her, to see if you can cuddle and maybe fall asleep again, but he stops you with sharp loud words.

This is when you understand. Last night wasn't a bad dream.

- * -

Flash. Your head snaps back and you're suddenly awake again. You look quickly around you, trying to figure out exactly where you are and it all comes back to you: the kitchen, the bodies in the bedroom, everything. You look around trying to find something that might tell you exactly how long you were under but all you can see is that it's still dark outside. The only clock in the room seems dead, its needles unmoving, telling all the world that it's 11:30 at night.

You push your chair away from the table and stand up. As you get up, your head starts spinning and you need to grab the edge of the table to stabilize yourself and not fall down. You know that you need to eat if you want to be able to deal with this situation, even if it's just splitting before you get caught.

You head for the cupboards once again and start looking for something to eat, something sweet with a lot of sugar. You know that if you go for anything else, your stomach will revolt again and that won't help.

You find an apple in one of the cupboard and you think about eating it but then change your mind, thinking about the acid in the apple and what it would do to your stomach. You finally settle on a pouch of blueberry Kool-Aid, dropping all of it in a glass that's too small and add some water.

You choke it back, trying to ignore the screaming pain from your teeth, the too sweet taste of the paste as it goes down your throat. The blue paste calms down your nerves and your stomach and helps with the spinning head, but you're still hungry. You figure that maybe you can choke down something else while you're feeling ok, build up your strength. You wipe your mouth with the back of your hand. The blue from the Kool Aid has left a nasty smear on your hand, like the blue blood of some strange monster.

You pick up a can of beans that sitting on the shelf and look at it for a while. You think about heating it up, looking for some bread to go along with it and then change your mind. While the tangy spicy taste sounds good to you, you know better. You know that the spices would play a number on your stomach and while it might not make you throw up, you'd have the runs for a few days and that wouldn't do. Can't have the runs and be on the run at the same time.

You open the fridge and settle for some eggs, washed down with some fresh milk. The smell of the eggs frying in butter on the stove actually calms your nerves, its familiar smell bringing back memories of times at the front.

- * -

Butter. You can still smell butter when your dad brings you to the movie theater, but now the butter smells rancid, like if someone had left it out too long and it, like this ritual, had gone bad. Your dad still smiles at you and tries to pretend that everything is all right, but you know better. You can barely look him in the eyes without seeing your mother's face, all black and blue.

He goes through the usual routine with you, buying you a big bag of popcorn, walking in the theater with you and bringing you to your seat. You sit and pretend that you're enjoying yourself, cracking a little smile, but secretly, you can't wait for the bastard to leave you here, all by yourself. Maybe when he finally takes off, you'll be able to forget about everything and loose yourself for a little while.

Thinking back, you know that it's at this moment that you promised yourself that you'd never become someone like him, that you'd never hit someone you loved, that you'd rather die or leave than hurt someone who was close to you.

And you kept that promised. Even though it killed you to do so.

- * -

Rush. You can feel your heart beat so fast as you try to undo your seatbelt. You finally manage, your hands clothes covered in blood. You reach for the door handle and yank furiously at it, trying to make the door open faster than it wants to.

You do everything you can not to look behind you, not to listen to see if you can hear her voice moans breathing.

You finally manage to open the door and can hear the wails of the sirens in the distance. The car that hit yours is totaled, the driver obviously dead as the driving shaft is poking out of his back, his face shoved through the windshield of his car. As you panic and try to figure out what to do, you catch sight of her in the backseat. Her young face is covered in blood, her eyes closed. She's still wearing the seatbelt and you can't decide if that's a good or a bad thing.

You decide to run, to disappear. Her mother doesn't need you in her life, doesn't need a junky who killed her only child. Beside, you have no idea how you would deal with looking at her, at her eyes for the rest of your life. It would only drag you deeper into your habit. Might as well do that away from her, let her rebuild her life without a pitiful junky present. Might as well kill yourself with the junk, slowly, paying for this crime your own way.

So you run from the scene and you've been running ever since. You've never seen her again and you did not even attend your child's funeral. Better her mother think you dead, or at least gone from her life. And besides, you were probably really high the day she was buried. You can barely remember anything of the month that followed the accident.

- * -

Calm. Somehow, you feel calmer now than you did a few minutes ago. Maybe it's just the food in your stomach that is calming your nerves or maybe it's the finality of the situation. Somehow, the idea of running away from this mess has left your mind and you decide that you should look around, at least for a little while.

You get up from the table and put the dirty dishes in the sink, along with the other dishes. You run water over them, not to wash them but to simply rinse off the food and vomit that is congealing on them. Once you're satisfied that the puke is all gone, you close the tap and wipe your hands.

You turn away from the sink and look at the staircase going up and you decide that it's about time that you go check what's upstairs. A good kick should open that door nicely. It's not like the noise will awaken the people who live here, right?

XIII

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

Cary sat bolt upright. He held the photo close to his face, willing Joan and Anny to appear again. Where had they gone? He touched the white scratches gingerly with the tip of his fingers, trying to figure out if someone had simply scratched them out or if something else was going on. The scratches felt smooth under his fingers, giving Cary the impression that they were part of the photo, as if he had been standing between two living, breathing accumulations of scratches when the photo was taken.

Cary crumpled the photo and threw it against the far wall. He did not watch it as it bounced off and finally landed near the couch. He simply curled up once again, his head against Sally's chest, as if listening to her gently beating heart would somehow make everything better.

Sally

(To Cary)

[Petting his head]It's ok. We sometimes do things we regret when we're angry. I'm sure you love your wife and kid and you didn't mean to do this.

Cary

(To Sally)

[Without looking at her]I didn't do it. I don't know who did, but I didn't scratch the photo. Why would I scratch out their faces? I love Joan, I love Anny. They're my everything. They're what kept me going during the war. They're the reason I got up every morning.

Sally

Tell me everything. Go ahead, let it all out.

Cary

[sobbing slightly, then catching himself and stopping]Why would Joan cheat on me? We had the perfect life. I gave her everything she always wanted, she was never in need. I was a good provider for her, for Anny.

Sally

Well, sometimes something is missing and people go looking for it in the strangest places.

Cary

After all I gave up for her, for them. The hell I went through...

Sally

What do you mean?

Cary

Oh, nothing. Ancient history. Was better for me anyway. You sometimes pick up some bad habits when you're in

strange lands. [laughs]Yeah, blame it on others, Cary, just like you always do...

Sally

Excuse me?

Cary

Sorry.[hesitating]I... I sometimes end up talking to myself... Joan thought that it was charming. I still remember that first night...

Cary stretched his arms by his side and patted his pockets absentmindedly. As he didn't find the familiar bump that he was looking for, a slight look of panic crossed his face and mixed in with the look of sadness that was currently there. He brought his smooth hands back to his face and rubbed his eyes, trying to dislodge the last tears from his eyes. He wondered for a second about the condition of his hands, about the lack of wrinkles. He could have sworn his hands face body were wrinkled, like Sally's skin, but when he looked at her hands, he could see that they were as smooth as a baby's. Maybe it was the booze playing tricks on him or maybe his mind finally snapped.

He tried putting it out of his mind and, trying not to move and let Sally know what he was doing, he dropped his hand off the couch and looked for the bottle of bourbon. Not looking where his hands were groping, he came across Sally's foot instead and, at first surprised, he started stroking it with the same rhythm she used to pet his head, soothing him, soothing her.

Cary

[Still trying to find the bottle]I'll never forget that first time, when I looked in her green eyes, her smile like a lighthouse. [giving up and letting his hands return to Sally's foot. He fondles it absentmindedly, like a child playing with his favorite teddy bear]I was going through a rough time at home and just being with her made everything ok. She was my everything back then, just like now. If it wasn't for her, I have no idea how my life would have turned out.

Sally

Sounds like you really loved her. Maybe you loved her too much

Cary

I didn't love her too much. I love her, period. How can you love someone too much? [He gets excited, his hands leaving her foot momentarily, flitting in front of his face like two panicked birds. He calms them down and they land back on her foot]It's like saying the sky is too blue or the sea too watery. You love someone, period. And I know she loves me as much... loved me, I guess...

Sally

She never mentioned anything to you?

Cary

No. Never. But you know what really hurts the most, apart from feeling betrayed? Anny. My daughter will never see me the same way again. If Joan is everything to me, Anny defines my life. I remember that time we got into an accident...[He starts sobbing softly.]

Sally

There there. Tell me about the accident.

Cary

I never saw the other car coming. Before I knew it, it rammed into us and crushed the left side of the car. I think the other driver was drunk or something. I must have been unconscious for a few minutes, banged my head pretty hard against the steering wheel and all. Thank god I was wearing my seat belt else I might have crashed head first into the windshield. When I came to, I thought she was dead. She was in the backseat and wasn't wearing her belt. I scrambled out of the car and checked on her. I must have died a thousand times at that moment. I couldn't open the side door since it was caved in from the impact. I looked at the other car and the driver was gone, probably ran away on foot, afraid of being caught by the police or something.

Sally

Did they ever find the man?

Cary

No. He simply vanished. I was making so much noise trying to open the door and yelling that Anny finally came to. I felt so relieved that I broke down. Her little face was covered in blood, but she seemed ok. The cops showed up with an ambulance a few minutes later. They tried sending us in two different ambulance to the hospital, but I wouldn't let go of her.

Sally

Was she ok?

Cary

More scared than anything. The blood came from a nasty cut just above her eyebrows, but it looked worse than it really was. I think she really freaked out when she saw me panicking. You'd think a combat vet like me would be calmer under such conditions, but no. I panicked. I could even smell that old familiar smell from the battlefield. I

could smell the piss and shit in my pants, running down my legs.

Sally

[Laughing lightly]Ok, I didn't need to know that.

Cary

[Smiling slightly]Sorry. I just got lost in the moment there. [Stops, sighs deeply and starts speaking again]Anyway. I don't know how I would have lived if she had died. I could have never faced Joan again, knowing that I was responsible for Anny's death.

Sally

Sounds to me like you were as much a victim as she was. The other car rammed you, you had no way of stopping the accident. It wasn't your fault.

Cary

Joan said the same thing to me, but I know better. Trust me, it was my fault.

Cary let go of Sally's foot and curled up again. He gave a small shudder and stretched out. He sat up, rubbed his eyes and got up. Not looking back at Sally, he simply walked out of the room.

Cary

[Stopping at the door, not looking back][I need a drink. I don't know what you did with the bottle, but I need a drink.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL BAR AREA. NIGHT.

Stretching the kinks out of his limbs, Cary walked behind the bar. As he bent down behind the bar to see what booze was available, he could feel his knees popping from the exertion. His wrinkled hands shook slightly as he rummaged and tried to find the perfect bottle, one that would burn the emotions out of him with a gentle fire, yet would obliterate any traces of memories at the same time.

Coming across a bottle of whiskey, he pulled the bottle out, looked at the label and opened it. Cary sniffed deeply at the smell wafting from the open neck and, seemingly happy with his selection, took a deep drag of the amber liquid inside. The liquid burned its way down his throat, giving off a comforting warmth.

Cary

[Talking to himself]This will do. Not quite what I really want, but it will do for now. Anyway, it's not like these old hands could do much good. I'd probably rip my skin pretty bad and not even get a taste of the stuff.

Cary capped the bottle, straightened out and walked out of the room, back into the living room and back to Sally.

INTERIOR. OLD SALLY'S HOTEL LIVING ROOM. NIGHT.

He walked back into the living room, feeling the stiffness in his joints, his age weighing him down. Sally hadn't moved from her place on the sofa. He could see her eyes tracking every movement he made, every feeling he felt. He knew that she was looking out for him, did not judge him. He couldn't really tell why he felt so at home with her, why she should bring him so much comfort, why she did not judge him.

When he had come back from the war, it took a long time for him to feel at ease with Joan. He had tried, and succeeded, in hiding his secret from her. He didn't know, or didn't wish to know, what she would have done if she had found out. He had thought at the time, that she judged him every time she looked at him. He didn't feel the same way when he was with Sally. It was as if she was simply there for him, to listen to him, to comfort him.

Cary

[Holding the bottle between his face and Sally's face]Care for a swig? You paid for it after all. [He takes a swig of it without waiting for an answer. He recaps the bottle once more and holds it out to Sally]

Sally

No. I gave that up a long time ago. Now I mainly have liquor here for the guests. But you go ahead. Just don't overdo it. At your age...

Cary

[Slightly pissed off]What difference does it make? Might as well end it all anyway. It's not like I can go back, want to go back anyway...

Sally

Is this why you came here? Like an elephant, you came here to die when you couldn't face life out there?

Cary

What? No! I... I came here for the funeral. You know that.

Sally

Who's funeral? You know as well as I that you know no one here anymore. The last people who lived here that you knew were your parents.

Cary

I know you. You still live here.

Sally

Nice try, bucko. Tell me who's funeral you came for.

Cary

I... I don't remember. My uncle, I think.

Sally

Your uncle died a long time ago. I should know, I dated him for awhile after your aunt died.

Cary

Well, if I came here to die, why did Joan call? Why didn't she stop me when I left home?

Sally

Did she? Maybe she did let you go. Did you talk to her? Why is it that you don't remember your own phone number?

Cary

Who told you I don't remember my own phone number?

Sally

I saw you look it up in the register. For all you know, I might have written it wrong or simply put anything there. Maybe you knew she was cheating on you and that's why you left. Maybe she kicked you out of your own home.

Cary

No. She would never cheat on me. She loves me. Why are you saying these things to me? What do you want from me?

Sally

I'm just trying to make you admit that you are here to die.

Cary

Shut up! Stop it!

Cary took a few steps back, holding the bottle in front of him like a man holding a torch, trying to fend off some imaginary predator. His other hand patted his coat pockets, looking for the gun that had been there just moments earlier. He could no longer find it and he wonder for just a second what had happened to it.

As he stepped back, he could feel something crunching under his foot. Looking down, he could see that he had stepped on the balled-up photo, the one with his wife and kid scratched out. Keeping his eyes on the unmoving Sally, he bent down and picked up the wadded picture.

Cary stood up and using only his left hand, smoothed out the photo against himself. He brought it up to his face and looked at it once more, willing the scratches to disappear and be replaced by his kid and wife.

The once-white scratches were now red splotches, completely covering his hands in the photo and his Anny's face, torso. Joan was simply not there anymore, an angry void where she once stood. Puzzled, Cary touched the red splotches and noticed that it came off on his fingers. Rubbing the tip of his finger against the other fingers, he could feel the slickness of the liquid, the thickness of it. He brought his finger to his lips and tasted it gingerly, tasted the iron and salt of the blood that had covered the photo.

Cary dropped the photo and took a few steps back, looking back and forth at the photo and at Sally sitting on the couch, looking peaceful and unaffected by the events.

Cary

[Angry, confused]Who the fuck are you and what do you want? Why are you playing these games with me?

Sally

You know why you're here and you know who I am. Why do you ask such obvious questions?

Cary stopped dead in his tracks. He took one more look at Sally and, keeping his eyes on the old lady sitting on the couch, hurled the bottle towards her, straight at the window that stood above the couch.

A large, multi-pointed star appeared at the point of contact between the bottle and the window, sending knife-shaped shards outwards. During all this time, Sally's expression did not change nor did she move to try and get out of the way of the bottle. It was as if she knew that Cary could not, would not hurt her. She didn't try to stop the bottle from hitting the window, nor did she made any attempt at stopping Cary as he ran forward and dove out the now-open window, into the night.

EXTERIOR, IN BACK OF LARGE BUILDING. NIGHT.

Cary hit the ground pretty hard, sending the breath out of his old frame. He knew full well that he'd regret when morning came, if morning did indeed come. He got up, rubbed at his elbow, shoulder and looked back. He did not think that Sally would follow him and he was right. She was just standing in the window, staring at him, a neutral look on her face. He looked down and could see by the moonlight that his jacket had gotten ripped by the jagged pieces of glass sticking from the window frame, huge jagged teeth smiling at the night. His right pant leg was also torn at the knee from the impact of landing on it.

Cary turned around and started to head for the center of town, for the Diner, hoping that someone would be there, someone who might take pity on him.

As he walked away, he could not help but think about his car, his clothes, everything he had come to this town with. It was as if the town was trying to strip him of everything, trying to make him as naked as when he was born.

As I weighted the gun in my hand, trying to decide what to do with it, I heard Suzie's voice ring out from inside the cabin. The sound of her voice snapped me out of it, forcing me to take a quick decision. I decided to pocket the gun and not to tell her anything about it.

I reached across the seat and closed the glove compartment. I didn't look further in it, not wanting to know what else was in there. I already knew too much about the owner of the car by now, and I wanted to know nothing more about him.

I slid out of the car and closed the door behind me. I reached to lock the car door, and, thinking about it, decided not to lock it. After all, I had the key and we were in the middle of the forest. No one would take the car, and if they did, I would know about it right away. Besides, it wasn't like it was mine to start off with. If someone wished to steal it, so be it. It would be poetic justice.

I walked into the cabin, conscious of the weight of the gun in my pocket. Suzie was standing at the back of the cabin, looking around. She had found a gas lamp and was exploring, looking for god knows what. Her figure, standing between the lamp and the wall, casted large shadows against the walls, defeating the very purpose of the lamp, forcing Suzie to pick up objects and turn around if she wanted to examine them in more details.

The light let me see what I couldn't see earlier when I opened the door. The cabin looked like it hadn't been lived in for a long time, but, apart from the accumulation of dust, seemed in fairly good order. Whomever had lived here before actually took care of the place.

As I looked at the paintings on the walls and the bookshelves crammed with books, I could see and feel Suzie's presence on the other side of the room. She seemed oblivious of me, even though she had called me when I was in the car. For all intents, she seemed bent on actively ignoring me and making sure that I knew she was doing that. For all that, I wasn't sure I cared that she ignored me. I wasn't sure I liked her anymore.

As I got closer to one of the bookcases, I saw that there was a few pictures in frames leaning on the spine of the books, obscuring their titles. I reached out to look at one of the photo, the people in it partially hidden by the shadows and the glare of the light. Photo in hand, I turned towards the door and examined it. It was of a family, a happy looking couple with a small child. The little girl couldn't have been over 3 years old and her smile matched that of her beaming parents. The picture brought a tear to my eyes, although I didn't know why.

"What are you looking at?"

I hadn't heard Suzie creeping closer to me and she startled me. I had been lost in the photo and its promise of a happy family.

I didn't reply, but simply handed her the photo. I didn't know what to tell her, how to explain what made me so sad about this family. She took the photo from me and looked at it.

"They look so happy" she said, hugging herself with her left arm. "Do you think we'll ever find such happiness?"

"I don't know" I told her, turning to face her. I looked at her, waiting for her to lift her eyes and look at me. When she finally did, our eyes locked and all anger left me. I took the photo gently out of her hand and put it back on the shelf without breaking eye contact.

She opened her arms to me and I walked into them, hugging her to me. She started to cry softly. I could feel her salty tears running down her cheeks, my cheeks as she stood there, pressing her face to mine. I had hoped that our faces would touch tonight, but I would have never guessed that it would have happened this way, that it wouldn't have been our lips, tongue, touching.

"Look," I said, "I'm sorry."

"I know. So am I."

"Let's forget about all this" I said, taking her face in my hands and looking in her eyes. "Let's make the most of this night."

"How can I?" she said, fresh tears filling her eyes, bringing her face against mine again, so that I once more tasted the salt of her tears.

"We should forget about it. You know I'll be gone soon and we might never see each other again."

"How could you? How could you sign up for service without talking to me about it first? Doesn't our relationship mean anything to you?" As she said these last words, I could feel the last sob wracking through her body, her tears made more physical, more real.

"Trust me, this is all for the better. You know you can find someone better than me, someone who will take good care of you, someone you can rely on." Although the words were spilling out of my mouth, I wasn't really sure what we were talking about. I wondered briefly if she knew what was happening, but before I could voice my incomprehension, she started talking again.

"Who are you to tell me what's good for me? I know what's good for me and it's leaving me," she screamed at me, hitting my chest with her fists. It was strange looking in her eyes at that moment, with her face distorted with rage and her eyes completely confused. I understood that she had no idea what was going on either, that she didn't understand where the words coming out of her mouth came from.

"What I need is to be with the man who loves me, the man I love" she yelled.

I decided to let the moment take control of me, to let everything just unfold and see what would happen.

"Look, you know I'm not good for you. You've seen my parents. You know that we'll just end up in the same place."

"No, we can fight this, we can make it work out."

"No! I don't want to hurt you like my dad hurts my mom. I don't want to hit you." With that, I took her into my arms. I could feel her shaking, the sobs making her whole body tremble.

"If you leave, I... there won't be a reason for me to... I..."

I looked at her face, trying to understand, trying to see what she was saying. I understood, but at the same time, I didn't want to understand.

"Don't. You'll be much better without me. You have so much to live for, so much to see," I said in her ear, pressing her face against mine.

Throughout the conversation, I noticed that my voice kept the same level, the same deadness while her voice rose and changed, flowing with the emotions she was expressing, if not feeling. I, on the other hand, felt nothing. My eyes were dry and I felt oddly distant, although why this was surprising I didn't know. The whole thing felt like we were replaying some event that took place here a long time ago, like we were puppets controlled by ghosts.

"No! You are everything to me. If you leave, I'll have nothing..."

"I..."

"Don't go. Or... or... bring me with you" she said, pulling her face away from my chest, looking me directly in the eyes.

"I can't. I..."

"You bastard!" she yelled. It was all I could do to catch her arm in time, before she hit me across the face. We stared at each other, not sure what was going on but getting caught up in the psychodrama that was taking place inside our bodies.

"Stop! Shut the fuck up! You know I can't! You know this is better. If there was a better way, I would do it. But there isn't!" I was yelling. I could feel my neck muscle tense up as I screamed the words, spittle flying from my wide open mouth.

She just looked at me, her face crumbling, her eyes filling with tears. She lowered her head and gently rammed me in the chest with her head, her arms circling my chest, trapping me in her warmth.

"I... I know... I... I love you too. I don't want to... I... maybe..." She was no longer speaking, but simply crying, making my shirt wet with her tears. I stroked the back of her head, speaking gently once more.

"Maybe we should get married. You're right. We can make this work out." As the words left my mouth, I could feel my body falling back under my control. Thing is, I didn't let her go, choosing instead to pretend to still be under the control of whatever force was doing this thing to us, simply to hold her against me for a little while longer.

She let out one more sob and stopped. She stiffened in my arms, her whole body going rigid. She pushed away gently from me and looked me in the eyes once more. Her eyes were rimmed in red, tears gently streaking her face in line of shining light.

"What? What did you say?" she said, a strange look crossing her face.

"I... I dunno. I guess I said something about getting married" I told her, unsure what was happening now that the force had left me. I could not help but feel like a puppet who's strings have been cut.

"Look, I know this evening was supposed to be magical and all, and it's gone to strange places, but if you just want to get into my pants, say so. No need to be so dramatic about the whole thing." She wiped at the streaks absentmindedly with the back of her hand. She seemed to not be aware of the exchange we just had. Did I just dream the whole thing or did it really happen? Bottom line was that I was currently holding her in my arms, feeling all warm and fuzzy on the inside. And yes, some other part of my body had responded quite favorably to her warmth in my arms and she knew it.

Not really sure what to do, I bent my head to her once more and kissed her on the lips. She gave in easily, her soft hungry lips opening to let my tongue into her mouth, hers into mine. We stood there, kissing, for what felt like hours. We broke the kiss eventually, she pulling her head away, looking at me askance.

"You're a pretty good kisser for a weirdo" she teased.

"Well, you ain't so bad for a pushy chick" I shot back, a twinkle in my eye. Maybe this evening would be ok after all.

I took her hand in mine and pulled away from her. I started to walk towards the door and the car, pulling her gently behind me, but then thought better of it. I looked around the room to see if there was a couch or a bed of some sort, where we could make ourselves more comfortable.

There was indeed a bed in the room, squeezed between a kitchen table and a back door. I didn't understand why such a tiny cabin would need a back door, but right now, there was other things on my mind.

I pulled Suzie gently behind me as I made my way to the bed. We settled on the bed and made ourselves comfortable indeed. We started to fool around, the tension between us melting as snaps and buttons came undone.

The pale expense of her skin opened up before my hungry hands, my hungry mouth. She, on the other hand, saw things that only my mother and some of the guys in gym class had seen before, but unlike the guys, she didn't find them funny, but rather enjoyed their sight.

As my hands were finding new places to hide and keep warm, I heard a noise. Raging teenage hormones being what they are, I tried ignoring the sound at first, concentrating harder on Suzie's body and pleasure, but the noise persisted. If it was only up to me, I would have completely ignored it, but seeing as someone else was with me, we stopped. Suzie's sense of responsibility, and her huge curiosity, got the better of our fooling around.

I got up, pulled my pants back on and tried to pinpoint the source of the sound. It was like a low pitch hum, like someone, or something, was humming or singing to themselves. As I looked around, I came to realize that the sound was coming from the back door, the door that was right besides the bed we had been lying on a few moments before.

"Ok, what's that noise?" Suzie's face had gone an angry shade of pale as she asked me that question. "Do things always get this weird when you're on a date?"

"Never happened to me before," I said, trying hard not to let her know that she was the first one. I have to admit that things were getting weirder and weirder. As far as coming of age was concerned, this took the cake and ran with it.

"Well, what now brown cow? Do we simply ignore it or should we just lock ourself in the car and pray for morning?" she said, trying to diffuse the tension with some bad humor.

I wasn't sure what to tell her. On one hand, I was as scared as her and wanted nothing more than run away from this place. Problem was, I wasn't sure where this place was at all and even less on how to get back home. On the other hand, I did have that little equalizer in my pocket, even though it only had one bullet in it.

"I say we check it out," I told her as I pulled the gun from my pocket.

"Have you gone completely crazy?" she yelled at me, eyeing the gun. "Where did you get that thing from? Do you even know how to use it?"

"It was in the glove compartment. It's not like I'm actually gonna use it, just show it to whatever makes that noise and get it to shut up." I don't know where that sudden bravado came from, but it did have some effect on Suzie. She got real quiet and looked at me in a different way. I don't know if it was because she changed her mind and respected me, but that's what I wanted real hard to believe.

I went to the door and pressed my ear against it, trying to find out if the noise did indeed come from the other side. I could make out the sound a little clearer now but still couldn't tell if it was the whimpering of a hurt animal or the mewling of an infant in want of a feeding.

I took a step back from the door, opened the gun's chamber and made sure that the only bullet was sitting in the top chamber, so that if the need came up, it would be ready to do its thing.

"Well," I said to Suzie, looking her right in the eyes, "are you ready to do this thing?"

She didn't answer, but simply looked at me, her eyes reflecting my own fears back at me. For all the airs I gave myself, I was scared deep down. I had no idea what awaited us on the other side of that door, but somehow, I knew I had to do it.

Without waiting for an answer, I reached out to the doorknob and grabbed it. I turned it, feeling slightly surprised when it turned freely in my hand. I gave the door a push and it opened easily, without a sound.

I could make the top of stairs, but nothing else beyond that. I looked at Suzie and indicated the gas lamp with my chin, telling her to get the lamp and come back. She did just that, handing me the lamp. I looked at Suzie one more time, trying to assess whether she would follow me down the steps or not. She simply gave me a weak, lopsided smile.

I turned to the stairs, gun in one hand, the lamp in the other and went in. I had no idea what was awaiting us at the bottom of these stairs and did not care one bit that it was indeed odd for such a small house to have a basement, never mind one that seemed finished and not just made out of packed dirt.

Hunger. It's a different kind of hunger that fills the pit of your stomach as you turn to go up the stairs. It is that familiar nagging, the one you used to get when you were stepping in a strange environment, unsure of what was around the corner, all senses on high alert, more alive than you could ever be when you came back. That sense that everything around you is breathing, living, like anything could, and would given half a chance, end your life. It never ceases to amaze you how much you enjoyed these moments.

As you head towards the steps, you find yourself walking on the ball of your feet, like a cat ready to pounce. You're not even sure why you're doing it but it makes you smile, makes you feel good about yourself. Like an exclamation point, you start bouncing lightly on the ball of your feet, like Tigger, from Winnie the Pooh. She used to love that video, watching it until the tape almost wore out.

With that sudden thought, you stop, the smile leaving your face. Reality comes crashing down on you. You have nothing to smile about, nothing to be happy about. All that's happened is that you've put some grub in your belly, nothing more.

You have nothing. You are nothing.

You don't even know where your next fix will come from. It's not like you can find someone in this town who handles this stuff. You're not even sure there's a doctor in these parts, and even if there is one, there's no guarantee that he'll be holding.

And yes, there's still the matter of the corpses in the front room. The bloody corpses and their torn-out throats. At least you assume that both of them have their throats torn out, even though you didn't have the stomach to check the other body, that of the wife.

You stop thinking, take a deep breath and start concentrating on that door, up the stairs. You have no idea what you'll find up there. Hopefully, there'll be some dough or at least something you can fence easily. Again, the reality of the small town hits you: there's probably no one to fence the goods to in these parts. You gotta keep your cool. You'll figure out something. You'll figure out what the hell you're doing here in the first place.

As you start going up the stairs you hear something, like a creaking noise and it's not coming from your footsteps. You look up and can see a thin line of light coming from the side of the door. Someone or something is opening the door. You start moving fast, away from the stairs.

Whatever is coming down, you don't want it to know you're here, so you find a hiding spot. At least, you're good at that and that means you don't need to think too much about it.

- * -

Shaking. Your hands shake so hard that you have a hard time simply screwing the needle in. You never thought your wife would leave, she just kept on talking and talking. It was as if she was completely oblivious to your shaking hands, to your wandering eyes. The fact that she was is a good thing, since she still doesn't know about your little habit. And you fully intend on keeping it your little secret.

When you came back, she thought it was nice that you encouraged her to go out and take classes, meet with her friends. She appreciated the fact that you allowed her, encouraged her to be active outside the house. Yes, it was nice of you, but at the same

time, it was selfish of you. Truth be told, you wanted her to be out so you could be alone to get your fix.

When she finally left, it was all that you could do to put the kid to bed your hands were shaking so. She knew, of course. She can always feel it when you're abrupt with her. She knows that you love her greatly, but she knows that you have a monkey on your back even though she wouldn't understand what it is and why you love it so. She simply knows that sometimes her daddy needs to be alone to feel better. And that during those moments, she needs to take some alone time as well.

You finally get the needle in and get ready to start cooking the junk. Got the kit out, the flame going and the spoon is filled. You can smell that sweet smell and your eyes start to water when you hear a noise coming from downstairs. You tell yourself that it's probably that damn cat again, just playing with the plants or something. You try and push it out of your mind and concentrate on the task ahead. Soon pushing things out of your mind will be real easy. Just a few more moments now and it'll all be worth the wait.

Just as you drop the wadded cotton ball in the liquid, you can see the door handle turn from the corner of your eyes and then you can hear her voice, your wife's voice.

You freeze, unsure what to do. It's just there, the sweet liquid ready to prime the syringe, yet you know you must put everything away. The door moves a bit, but it's a good thing you locked it before you started to get ready for your "breakfast". It's another habit you picked up, this one since you came back, mostly because you didn't want the kid to walk in on you. Thing is, this one is a good habit, unlike the other one. If she caught you doing this shit...

Your hands shake even more as you try and put away everything without spilling a drop. She knocks, asks you if everything is ok. You answer, trying to keep your voice from shaking, trying to stall her for time.

You finally open the door a few seconds later, telling her some lie about having a headache and locking the door to keep from being disturbed. You're not sure she believes you, probably thinking you were jerking off or something. Better she thinks you're cheating on her with some glossy paper doll rather than with a needle and some junk.

When she finally leaves, you finally finish fixing that hit. Pushing the needle down, you know that you'll be in for a grilling tonight but right now you don't care. Right now, all you want to do is ride that sweet wave to nowhere.

- * -

Primal. You're not quite unsure of exactly what the kid is the first time you lay eyes on him. If you'd have seen him on the street, back in the city, you might not have noticed him, thought him just another aimless kid walking the streets, his back hunched, his clothes dirty. But here, in this small village, in this cramped house, he makes quite an impression on you. The first word that jumps in your mind is primal, feral. The kid has a very predatory quality, the way he bounds down the stairs with a lamp hanging from his limp hand.

You've seen real tough street kids back over the water. Kids who subsist on whatever food they can find, who'll kill a wino for the pair of shoes he's wearing. This kid is different, simply in the way he walks, the way he carries himself. There's a sense of pride, of ownership in the way he carries himself. Yet, there is definitively an air of danger about him.

He stands in front of you, eyes scanning the room, nostrils wide open as if he is smelling the air, looking for a scent that's not supposed to be there. Yet he does not see you, smell you. His black, beady eyes are partially hidden beneath the thick bangs of his unruly hair, darting back and forth quickly. You can tell he's just a kid because there isn't any trace of a beard or facial hair on his chin. What there is on his chin is a copious amount of blood, as if he had just bitten down hard on someone's jugular and you know full well that he did. You know that he's the one responsible for the carnage in the bedroom.

Fear grips your stomach, threatening to push the little bit of food you've just placed there back out. You try to stay calm, to stay still and not betray your position. He has no reason to know you're here and you certainly don't want him to know.

He stops looking around, probably having established that he is alone in the room, the house. He walks over to the kitchen table and puts down the lamp. He goes back to the staircase and reaches inside, pulling someone out by the arm. It's a girl and she looks the worse for the wear. You tense up, ready to jump out and save her, but you stop yourself. You don't even know her, don't even know if she is really in trouble, don't even know if you have the strength to take him on.

And that's when you realize that you no longer have the baseball bat. You must have left it downstairs in the basement or something. And that damn kid has a gun tucked in his pants. You don't know if he can use it but you sure won't take that chance.

- * -

Tightness. There's something squeezing your stomach and you can't see it. It takes a few seconds for your 12 years old mind to realize that it's the contraction of your muscles that's squeezing your stomach tight. You're going out of your mind, going crazy at the situation, unsure what to do. Should you run and tell someone or simply hide? Should you stand up to him and defend her?

He's holding her by the hair, like a demented, blood-splattered puppet master. She's just hanging there, limp, dead for all you know. She might be for all the struggle she's putting up, except that you know she's still alive because you can hear her moaning softly, you can see tears dripping down from her downcast face.

He bends down towards her broken face body, pulling her up at the same time. He seems to be saying a few words to her and he starts laughing. She doesn't really react, except for a violent fit of coughing that sends more blood splattering on the floor.

You can feel a growing wet spot on your crotch but you try to stay still, to stop your bladder, to not make a noise. He doesn't seem to know or remember that you're around and the last thing you want is for him to find out.

As you blink a tear out of your eyes, you can see a baseball bat in the corner of the room. If only...

He raises her head again, this time more violently and he's saying something again to her. You can't make out what the hell he's saying, but this time, your mom reacts. She spits in his face, which doesn't make your dad happy. He hits her hard, again. This time, the blow to her face is so hard that it sends her flying, tearing a part of her scalp away.

He's screaming now and you can hear him clearly. He turns his back to you as he steps towards her limp body and you stop thinking. You stop being afraid for a second, at least, you stop being afraid for your own well being.

You run to the baseball bat in the corner and grab it. Before he knows what's going on, you're on him, hitting him with all your strength. You barely remember moving

with the bat, can barely see from the tears that fill your eyes, can barely hear from your own screams as you hit him again and again. You're not even sure you're actually hurting him, but somehow, it feels good to let out all your rage.

The next thing you know is that you're sailing backwards, arms and legs flailing and then you hit the wall. It knocks the wind out of you and you slip to the floor, almost passed out from the collision. You lift your head and see him dimly stepping towards you. You feebly raise a hand, trying to deflect the blows, to make him stop somehow, to plead with him, but he still hits you. Hard.

He lands a few blows and then he stops. At first you think that he's just toying with you, trying to make you think that he's done but his yells tell you differently. This time it's not a yell of rage, but a yell of pain. He flails at his back and goes running out of the room.

You can see your mom standing right where he was before, looking weak and broken. You understand from the look on her face that it took all she had to get the knife and stab your dad.

This was the last time you saw him. He never came back to the house and your mom never mentioned him again and neither did you. You tried to forget about him, about the constant abuse and you did. At least, until you met her and you fell in love.

- * -

Still. Everything in the room is very still while the kid is looking around again. Maybe he does sense your presence, maybe he knows that something is up. You think about the eggs you just cooked and the odor it must have left in the room, but there's not much you can do about that now. You just stay still and wait for him to leave or to come looking for you. At this point, anything is better than this intolerable stand-still.

The girl opens her mouth to say something but before a sound can escape her lips, the kid turns around and stares her down, the sound dying before it can even come out. This seems to snap him out of it and he starts heading out of the room, towards the front of the house and the bedroom. She doesn't resist and meekly follows him.

You wait for a few moments until you're sure that they're gone and then you stand up. You stretch your legs a bit, snapping the hurt out of your knees and you head to the door that leads downstairs, back to the basement and hopefully the baseball bat.

You move slowly, trying not to make any noise as you open the door and go down. You close the door behind you and find yourself in darkness again. Your hand reaches for the switch to turn on the light, but you stop, thinking better of it. If the kid comes back to the kitchen, he might see the light spilling from under the door, so you figure that you're probably better off getting the lamp instead.

You go back in the kitchen, looking into the front room to make sure that he can't see you. He doesn't seem to be there, but the girl is there, staring straight back at you, her eyes wide. You put your finger to your lips and she nods back her agreement. You can see fear in her eyes but she understands that you don't have a weapon and that, if she wants to become free again, you need something to fight with.

You grab the lamp and head back to the basement. Once downstairs, you find the bat, leaning against that ratty brown bear you were looking at earlier.

- * -

Itchy. Your skin feels dry and drum-tight as you sit in your living room. She is playing with her toy bear on the floor, in the middle of the room. She looks so peaceful,

so at odd with the way you feel. Try as you want to push the need away, it won't simply disappear and somehow you know that she can feel your need. You've always known that she knew you better, knew your little habit better than your wife, her mom, ever did.

As you sit there, staring dead ahead, scratching yourself and aware of her as someone is aware of a fly in a large room, you try and convince yourself that you don't need the junk anymore. You have everything a man can want, right? Why do you need that monkey on your back? So what if it brings you a little bit of heaven. All it does most of the time is make you miserable, keeps you away from your family. Why did you ever start using it?

As you ask yourself those questions, you can feel your resolve slip away until you convince yourself that indeed, you will give it up, but just not right now. You'll do one more hit and kick it for good. Problem is, you don't have any here and she won't be back for a few hours.

You start making a list of people who might be able to come at a moment's notice to take care of the kid while you go out and score. The list is really short and, after a few calls, proves to be empty. You look at the kid and start thinking that, just this once, it might not be so bad. Besides, what's worse? Staying here with her dad who's jonesing for a fix, going slowly crazy or staying in a locked car for a few moments while daddy does his thing?

So you dress her up and tell her that you two are going for a little ride. She's all excited about that and you encourage her, turning the whole thing into a little game. You make her promise not to tell mommy, that this is your little secret game, just between the two of you.

While you smile at her and she giggles at the idea, you can't help but to be sad. You remember clearly when the bastard used to manipulate you the same way and it hurts to know that you're doing the same thing to your family.

You push all thoughts of your father out of your mind and put on your jacket. You have to do this right away, before she gets back, before the sweats and the shakes get too strong.

- * -

Solid. The feel and heft of the bat in your hands helps to calm your nerves. You take a few trial swings with it, relishing the weight of it. You take a few deep breaths, getting ready mentally for the fight that will come up. Maybe you're just wasting time, trying to delay the inevitable.

The scream brings you quickly to your senses, focusing all your attention. Before you know it, you're at the top of the stairs, bat in hand, more ready than ever.

The bastard will pay for everything, even the things that are not his fault. This may or may not be his house, but he has no place here.

EXTERIOR, STREET. NIGHT

Stripped, ripped and stranded, Cary walked, hunched over, in the middle of the street. He dragged his torn jacket in his left hand, a white flag cut to shreds by enemy fire. As he walked in front of a shop in what he assumed was the main street, he caught his reflection in the window of a clothing store, perfectly lit by the moonlight. He stopped, looked at it and drew himself straight in a futile effort to make himself look more presentable.

The sight disgusted him. He looked as bad as that wino, the one from earlier that night in front of the Diner. He looked for a place to dump his jacket and saw a trash can at the corner of the street. As he approached the garbage, he caught a glimpse of something moving from the corner of his eyes. He turned his head and, seeing nothing, he shrugged.

Cary

(mumbling to himself)

Great. Now you're getting spooked by cats and dogs.
Might as well, it's not like I still have my dignity after all...
[he wipes his nose with the back of his hand, and then
uses his jacket to wipe his hand clean.]

He walked over the can and dumped the jacket in. He rolled up his sleeves and, swatting at his pant legs lightly, tried dusting them but it only made matter worse. His once white shirt was covered in streaks of dust and dirt and his pants were torn at the knees.

Cary

(looking himself over in the window)

Yeah, you've really gone and done it now. Lost you car,
lost your wife, lost your way and now you lost any
resemblance to a civilized man.

Cary dragged his hand through his hair, trying to get that cowlick back down, line up with the rest of his dyed-black hair. As he fought with his hair, he could see the face of his watch, scratched and the hands unmoving. He let out a deep sigh and resumed the losing fight with his hair. Once he got his hair in a semblance of neatness, he started walking once again amidst the shadows of the town.

Cary kept walking more out of habit, of a need for something to do than with an actual goal in mind. He could always go back to the Diner, but it was probably still closed and the last thing he needed was coffee to give him ulcers and keep him awake.

Cary

(Out loud, as if addressing a small crowd)

C'mon! Put one feet in front of the other. Keep it up! Don't
let it drag! Put your back into it! [He starts to laugh] And to
think I gave it up for you, because I thought you'd...[he
laughs again, but talking to himself now, in a much quieter
voice] You bitch. You just couldn't wait for me to leave the
house, did ya?

Something stirred again in the corners of Cary's vision. Again he turned quickly and couldn't see anything but the shadows placed there by the light of the moon. Everything seemed quiet in the street, except for Cary and his torn-up suit.

Cary
(out loud)

Ok, wise guy. Stop that right now. I've fought in wars, you know. If I lay my hands on you, you'll see that I still have some fight in me and God knows I could use a good punch-up.

Cary waited, fists positioned in a semi-threatening pose. He tried as much as possible to stop his skinny arms from shaking, but the cold and the situation conspired against him. After a few seconds, he lowered them and glared at the night.

Cary
(out loud)

That's what I thought. Not so tough, are ya? Well, stay away from me. Leave me alone. [lowering his voice]
Everyone else has...

Cary turned back in the direction he was going and, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, tried to walk away with an assured gait. He hadn't taken 20 paces when he saw a green, roundish object hiding in the bushes. He moved toward it and, bending, picked it up.

It was a green plastic army helmet, a child's toy. Although the makers had tried to make it as authentic as they could, its sheer weight, or lack thereof, betrayed its function as a toy.

Cary turned it around again and again in his hands, slowly at first and then faster and faster. He brought it close to his face a few times, looking for something that appeared not to be there at all. Finally he stopped, a solitary tear running down his face.

He could remember when, as a child, his father had given him such a toy. He had already been obsessed with war toys and war movies, but his mom had forbidden his dad from ever buying him such toys, claiming that she didn't want him to grow up a violent man. Unfortunately for Cary, his dad had listened to his ma, at least for a long while.

That day would forever be etched into his memory. It must have been a Sunday, a long long time ago. Thinking back on it, Cary thought that he must have been six or seven years old. His dad had announced to his mother that he was taking him to the movies. Although Cary had been really happy at the news, it wasn't that out of the ordinary for his father to take him to the movies, but most of the time, his mother would come as well, wedging herself between the two males. She had kidded them again and again that she had to keep an eye on them, lest they took in the wrong type of movies, the ones that were not so wholesome and that might put ideas in Cary's already overactive imagination. His dad would look at Cary during those times with a look in his eyes that said that, although she liked to tell them she was kidding, she really was telling the truth.

That day had been different. When his mom had asked what they were all going to see, he had simply told her that he was only taking the boy, that they needed some

time alone, to bond. She had protested at first, not loudly but just enough for Cary to know that she didn't approve. His dad had looked at her and she had quieted down real quickly. When she asked what movie the two of them would see, he simply shrugged and changed the subject.

When the day came, Cary had noticed the large paper bag his dad had carried with him to the theater, and although he was dying to ask what was in it, he knew better and kept quiet, pretending that it wasn't there. When they finally got to the theater, his dad had told him to close his eyes. Cary closed them, unsure of what was going to happen. When he felt something being put on his head, he cringed a little at first, scared. When he heard his dad's voice asking him to open his eyes, he knew that he was in for a surprise.

At first he couldn't see what was on his head, but his dad smiled at him, giving him the unspoken permission to remove whatever was sitting there. He reached up and grabbed the green plastic helmet from his head. He couldn't believe it! His heart started beating so fast from the surprise that he thought that he was going to wet his pants right there. When he looked at his dad's face, he simply smiled and made a shush gesture with his hand. Cary understood. He understood that this was going to be the men's secret and that he must not tell his mom.

Of course that secret did not come alone, but he hadn't cared. From that moment on, Sunday was their day. They must have gone to see hundreds, thousands of pictures in the years and in a way, they helped shape Cary like his mom had said they would. Not that Cary had turned violent or anything, but the movies made sure that he indeed joined the army when he felt that his country needed him to. Maybe he would have never gone over if...

A sharp sound snapped Cary out of it. He turned sharply, wiping the few tears from his face.

Cary
(screaming)

What the hell do you want from me? Can't you all leave me alone? [he throws the helmet at the darkness. It bounces once off a wall and then skids to a stop across the sidewalk.] Haven't you toyed enough with me? Can't you just leave me to...

A slight glimmer caught Cary's eye and he though he heard a small clicking noise, like the hammer being drawn back on a gun. He stopped, his eyes bulging, unsure of what was happening, aware of the absurdity of his situation.

A sharp bang accompanied a brief flash in the darkness in front of him and a small puff of smoke rose, not a foot on his left. Conflicting instincts fought briefly for the control of Cary's limbs: the first one told him to simply stay still, that maybe whomever was shooting would not see him if he stay oh so very still. The second one, the one that was drilled into him for a few months when he joined the army told him to dive to the ground, fast, and find cover.

Cary did neither and took off running in the opposite direction, looking for any kind of cover to duck into. Although he was careful, he knew that his old drill sergeant would have been pissed at him for not going forward and finding a way to take out the sniper. Truth was, Cary was too old for this, preferring to simply take off and find a nice safe place.

As he turned a street corner, Cary ran into a black car that almost blended in the night. He stopped, his breath catching raggedly in his throat, his face bathed in sweat. He couldn't believe his luck. This was his car. Whomever had taken it earlier on must have simply abandoned it here. He hobbled quickly to the driver's side door and opened it.

CAR INTERIOR, NIGHT.

Cary got in and closed the door behind him. As he slapped his hands lightly on the dash, the seats, he could not help but let out a small laugh.

Cary
(giddy)

Well, Cary my boy, things are looking up. You can get out of this place after all. Bet ya that Joan did not expect you to come back home, did she? [he reaches over to the steering wheel, looking for the keys] Damn! The keys are missing... should have known that it wouldn't be so easy... Well, let's see if I remember how to do this...

Cary bent down below the steering wheel and fumbled around, looking for the wires that went into the ignition. He ripped out the matched pair of red wires and yanking hard, ripped them out. He twisted them together and could hear the engine catching right away.

Cary
(to the car)

There you go honey. Make papa happy, that's a good girl.

Cary sat back up and gripped the wheel. He gently put the car into drive and pushed down on the accelerator. A wide smile crossed his face as he guided the car into the street and his foot pushed down harder on the accelerator.

Cary
(to the car)

Screw this place. Joan, get ready, I'm coming home and you have a few questions to answer.

As Cary drove away, his feet getting heavier and heavier on the gas pedal, he passed the Diner and noticed, albeit briefly, that its light were still off. He could have sworn that he saw Hank sleeping under a tree, in a front yard close to the Diner.

At the speed Cary was driving, he was past the last house and out of the small town in no time at all. Although he wasn't completely sure of the direction he was taking, he was fairly sure that he would be hitting the highway fairly soon and then it was just a matter of driving until he got home. That would take what? 4, 5 hours at most? Somehow all thoughts of fatigue and sleep had left his mind and he could feel the blood flowing fiercely in his veins. Staying awake would be no problem. He would be back in... back where?

Cary slammed on the brakes, nearly sending the car into a fishtail. His mind racing, he tried frantically to remember what the name of his town, city was. Surely it would come back to him, like his phone number had.

Problem was, he still didn't remember his own phone number.

The combination of the moonlight coming in from the windshield and the lack of blood in his knuckles from the tension turned Cary's fingers bone white. He stood there, all color drained from his features, for a few moments trying to remember his house, his street, his wife. The only images that came to him were when he came back from the war, but he was sure that they didn't live in that house anymore.

Cary
(to himself)

Fuck fuck fuck fuck! [he punches the wheel] FUCK! [he stops in mid motion] Wait!, I know! [he starts fumbling at his pockets, looking for something.] Ah! There it is! [he holds out his wallet]

Cary opened his wallet and looked for his IDs, trying to ignore the scratched up picture of his wife and kid. He finally came upon it and pulled it out, a smile of triumph crossing his face for the second time tonight. His smile quickly faltered when he noticed that, again, someone had scratched out his name and address from every IDs in his wallet.

Throwing the wallet and the cards away in frustration, Cary collapsed on the steering wheel, weeping, his sobs timed perfectly with the purring of the engine.

Cary
(to himself)

Well, I guess I don't have much of a choice. [he sits up again, straightening his back and wiping the tears from his face.] Looks like I have to go back there. Maybe Sally can help me. Maybe she can tell me where I live.

Reaching to put the car back into drive, Cary stopped and, looking down at his rumpled shirt, smoothed it down. He cleared his throat and put the car back into drive. He started turning the car into the road, back towards the city.

He never saw the other car, which must have been driving along with his headlights off. The black Studebaker spun twice and ended up in the ditch. Cary hit his head hard against the windshield and blacked out, a light trail of blood running down the side of his face, blotting out the tears that had been there just moments earlier.

Somehow, we found ourselves in my kitchen, back at my folk's home, me with a gun in my hand and Suzie right behind me. I looked up the stairs we had come down from and could no longer see the cabin. I didn't remember closing the door behind me when I walked down the stairs, but maybe Suzy closed it without telling me. It didn't matter much anyway.

As I stood in the kitchen, I tried taking the whole scene in, my eyes roaming from the stove to the dishes in the sink, over to the fridge and the blue Formica table. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, whether it was simply a proof that we weren't in my parents' kitchen, that this was some other kitchen, somewhere else or simply proof of the opposite, that this was indeed, somehow, my parents' kitchen.

I set the lamp of the kitchen table, the soft clunk of the lamp on the blue table bringing the reality of the setting back into focus. I went to the fridge and touched it gingerly with my fingertips, as if by touching it the fridge would reveal its true nature as some sort of doppelganger, a copy of the real thing, something out of "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" except with furniture and rooms.

As I went around the kitchen looking at everything, I could sense Suzy just standing there, looking at me.

"Where the hell are we?" she said, snapping me out of my touching mission.

"My parents' kitchen, I think" I answered, unsure.

"What? How the hell did we get back to the village?"

"Looks like we simply used the stair, didn't we?"

"Gee, thanks genius" she snapped back, "couldn't have figured that one out without you. Good thing you're here."

"Do you smell that? What the hell is that smell?" There was a strange smell lingering in the air, a weird mixture of burnt butter and urine overrode the expected smell of disinfectant and cleaning liquids.

Suzy didn't answer. By now I knew her enough to know that her anger and insults were just a way to cover her fears. She was as confused as I was but I seemed to handle it better.

I went over to the sink and looked at the dirty dishes in there. This couldn't be my parents' kitchen because when I had left earlier on, my mom had just finished the dishes and this sink was filled with dirty dishes. If anything, the smell was stronger here as well, but this time with a small whiff of something else beneath it all.

I backed away from the sink. Either this wasn't my parents' kitchen or someone else had been here. Neither answers made me very happy.

As I turned towards Suzy to ask her what she thought was happening, I could see her going towards the front room.

"Where are you going?" I asked her, trying to keep the edge from my voice.

"Well, if we're in your parents' kitchen, then we're back into town, right?" she said to me, over her shoulder.

"Yes, and?"

"Well, then I'm going home." With that, she flashed me a smile that revealed more than I wanted to, letting me know she had had enough.

"No!" I said, raising my voice. It struck me at this time that since we had come down the stairs and found ourselves in this kitchen, we had kept our voices low, keeping the silence fairly intact. We had done this probably out of instinct, trying to keep the adults that were in the house unaware of the fact that we were here.

“Shhh! Do you want to wake your parents? What are they gonna say if they find me in your kitchen at...” her voice trailed as she looked at the clock. I followed her gaze and saw that the clock proclaimed for all the world to see that it was only 11:30 at night.

“Don't worry... they're very... solid sleepers” I said, trying to regain the upper hand by staying calm. I hoped that the slight hesitations would not betray the white lie I had just told.

“What? Uh, yeah. How come it's still so early?”

“Don't trust that clock. I think it's busted or something.”

“Whatever. I'm going home. Bye” she snapped and started to head towards the front door.

I followed her.

“Stop.” A simple, single word out of my mouth, made all more powerful by the fact that I was now holding the gun and pointing it at her. She turned around and her eyes grew wide open.

“What... what are you doing?” she said, shaking slightly.

Truth be told, I wasn't sure what I was doing. It wasn't the first time I had done something tonight that I might regret later on, that I had simply reacted to a situation without thinking it through, but what the hell I figured. Wasn't my life as I knew it pretty much over by now anyway?

“You're not going anywhere. You're staying right here with me and helping me figure out what's going on” I said. The cold edge in my voice surprised me, but I tried not showing it. I couldn't let Suzy leave and tell her dad what had happened tonight.

“Look, I don't know what the hell you think you're doing, but quit it. I'm going home.” With that, she turned around and reached for the door.

With three steps I was at the door, slamming it closed again, causing Suzy to let out a scream.

“I said you're staying here with me.”

My face must have been inches from hers when the words left my mouth, and any kind of sexual tension that had been present or sated earlier on was definitively gone by now. She could see in my eyes that I was very serious and that, push come to shove, I wouldn't be afraid to use the gun.

“Ok... ok... sure, I'll stay. Whatever” she said, spitting the words out at me, like if she was doing me a big favor. “I'm not sure what use I'll be, but yeah, whatever. I'll stay.”

I backed away a little bit but kept my hand firmly on the door. She turned around and looked at the kitchen. As I looked at her face, I could see a strange look make its way across it quickly. I heard a small, quick noise and turned to look towards the kitchen, letting her eyes guide mine.

I could see nothing, but I was positive that I had heard a noise. Looking at the kitchen table, I noticed that the lamp was gone. There was someone else in the house with us. Or, somehow, my parents were awake and playing some strange game with me.

“What? What was that? You saw it?” I asked her.

“Saw what? I don't understand...” she started mumbling. I moved behind her and pushed her forward, towards the kitchen and followed her.

As we entered the kitchen, I looked around quickly, trying to find the lamp. Maybe it had just fallen on the floor and rolled, somewhere, and I was just being paranoid.

I took a few steps towards the table, looking underneath the table and around it.

“Did you see it fall? Where did it go?” I asked Suzy, trying to get her to tell me what she saw.

“I... I didn't see anything” she mumbled. I knew she was lying, but I wasn't sure what to do about it.

I started to head towards the door leading downstairs when I heard Suzy move again. I turned around just in time to see her bolting towards the front door of the house. I ran and overtook her, blocking her way by placing myself between her and the front door. She simply stopped, turned and headed for my parents' bedroom.

Before I could react she had opened the door and ran in the room. All I could see was her back when she flicked on the light. That's when she screamed. Long. Loud.

I have to admit that I haven't been completely honest so far. I have skipped or omitted certain details; details that I know might not endear me to everyone. Unfortunately for me, I now need to make light of these details and come clean.

When I told Suzy earlier that my parents were sound sleepers, it might have been a little bit of an exaggeration. At this precise moment, neither of my parents would have woken up if the house had been on fire, but for very different reasons. You see, I had killed one of them while trying to defend the other.

Tonight was no different from a number of other nights with my dad dragging his sorry drunk ass home late in the evening. I knew that it was a bad night, one of his nights when he walked home and started yelling at us right away. I was in my room when he came in but I knew. I could hear him stumbling in the house, destroying everything in his drunken path.

He started laying into my mom a few minutes later. At first, I did as I usually did: hid and hoped that he wouldn't come for me. I had tried convincing my mom several times that we should take off, leave him there or at least call the cops. Every single time she would protect him, telling me that he didn't mean it, that he had a lot on his shoulders. I hate to admit that I wanted very much to believe her, to believe him when the next day, sober and sorry, he would apologize. I used to convince myself that it was that way in all families, that it was the prerogative of the man of the house to let out some steam, some of that dark fury that we all hide inside. I know better now.

My mom would tell me, when I was old enough to question my dad's actions, that at least he didn't hurt anyone. I knew that he hit her sometimes, but it never seemed to leave much of a mark or really hurt her. It's funny how you can make excuses for the worst excess of the people you believe you love.

They yelled at each other for a couple of minutes, my mom trying to hold on to her end, giving as good as she was getting. He yelled something at her and then I heard a loud thump. She didn't answer and he just kept on yelling at her.

A few minutes later his rage seemed to abate, his yells becoming quieter and quieter, with more and more time between each one, until they just died down. The house became really still at this point and still I waited. I'm not sure if I just hoped that he would pass out or that everything was all right, but like a coward I waited. I knew something was wrong.

I crept out of the room, trying not to make any noise. The house was dark and I couldn't see my mom or my dad anywhere. When I finally got down the stairs into the kitchen, I could see some blood on the floor and I got really scared. I saw the bottle of booze my dad must have dragged home with him sitting on the kitchen table. Grabbing it, I could see that it was empty, the cork nowhere to be seen. I didn't know whether he drank the whole 26er that night or not. All I knew is that he had left the empty, dead bottle in the kitchen. The idea that an empty bottle was a dead vessel brought some

goosebumps to my skin, as the image conjured other images that I would rather not think about.

Just when I was about to put the bottle back on the table, the light snapped on behind me. I must have awoken my dad from his drunken slumber despite my attempts at being quiet, but he came roaring into the kitchen, yelling at me, blaming me for the accident earlier.

I had no idea what he was going on about, even though I suspected that it had something to do with my mother and their arguments. He jumped on me and started to hit me. At first I just let myself fall to the ground and rolled into a ball, trying to deflect his blows. It is at this point that I heard him break the bottle. I knew that I had to do something, and do something quickly if I didn't want him to hurt me with the broken bottle.

I rolled away from him quickly and got up. As I was heading for the door, he yelled something at me that made me stop. He told me I was just like my mother and that she had gotten just what she deserved. My blood froze in my veins. I stopped and faced him.

As much as he was yelling at me, angry at me, my mom, the world, there was still a sadness in his eyes but that didn't stop me. I lunged at him and fought him for the first time in my life. I managed to wrestle the broken bottle from his hand and, in a moment of pure rage, dragged it across his throat, ripping the flesh.

He seemed to fight the gash at first, trying to stop the flow and then he just gave up. I could swear that he almost looked peaceful as he pulled his hands away from his throat and let the blood flow freely. I could do nothing else but stare at him, deflating, with all his blood leaking out of his throat.

I stood up after a little while and went to get a mop, a bucket and some washcloths. I stripped him, cleaned his body and, once I was happy that it was clean and shouldn't be oozing out any more blood, brought him to the bedroom.

My mom was laying there. I wasn't sure if she was still alive or not, but she was laying very, very still. I didn't want to know if she was still alive or not. I just laid my dad beside her and tucked them in.

I went back to the kitchen afterwards and washed it clean. That's why I knew the kitchen was clean, that there was no dishes in the sink. I knew because I'm the one who made sure everything was spotless, using whatever cleaning liquids I could find to remove all traces of blood, of shit, of piss that might tell people what happened in the kitchen.

I dumped the bloody clothes and mop downstairs in the basement and then I just went back to my room. I must have sat there for a few hours, simply starrng at the walls before I made up my mind and went for my nightly walk. I tried convincing myself that something would happen tonight that would make everything alright. The car was like a gift from Heaven, a proof that I had done the right thing, but finding myself back into my house proved that I was wrong, that I was being punished for my actions, for the sins of my father, my mother.

As she stood there in my parents' room screaming, everything came back into focus. If there had been any doubts before, now it was clear to me that Suzy could not leave here tonight. She had seen too much and the fact that her dad was a cop didn't help. I wasn't sure what to do, but hopefully it would come to me before the night was over. We had shared maybe a little too much tonight. She knew me too well.

I didn't want to hurt Suzy, but as I brought the gun up, I knew it was the only thing I could do.

Problem was, I didn't count on being knocked out. The blow came swiftly and from behind me. I passed out right away, catching a vague whiff of urine and burnt butter before the colors drained from the world.

Bright. The brightness of the light slams into your eyes as you swing the bat around and catch the kid upside the head. As the kid's body slumps to the floor, you can hear her screaming again. You look up and see her, terrified, seemingly unsure of what to be afraid of, her eyes darting back and forth between you and the kid, the gun and the bat. And you know exactly how she feels.

You reach out to her only to hear her yell even louder, until you realize that there is some blood on the bat that you are clutching tightly in your left hand. Understanding how this could be seen as threatening, you deposit the bat by the door, just out of her reach. You start reaching again, hopefully less threatening now.

She can't be much more than 16, 17 tops, although she probably tries really hard to look older than that. She's what, 2, 3 years older than Anny? If you hadn't killed her, hadn't brought her along with you, hadn't involved her in your bad habit, that is. Anny would could should look like that now. Instead, she's buried under so much dirt and there is no more skin on her bones, the worms having eaten it a long time ago.

She stops screaming. You smile at her, nod. As you keep on approaching, you notice her eyes drift towards the slumped body of the teenage boy. A little bit of blood is oozing out of the back of his head, probably where the bat made contact. Hopefully, he'll get nothing more than a nasty headache and a bad bruise, but you doubt that. You probably hurt him a lot more than that, but that's the price he has to pay for playing with guns, pointing them at others.

The gun. That's what she's looking at. She doesn't care about the kid, she's just figuring out that with the gun, she'd have the upper hand.

You dive for the gun before she can make a move. You can hear her screaming again the moment you make your move and your fingers close around the grip. You roll out of the way, getting up quickly, pointing the gun at her. You straighten up, tucking the gun safely in the back of your pants. You show her your empty hands as you move forward, but now that she's started screaming again, she won't stop.

You hit her, a quick sharp slap with the back of your hand. You didn't want to do that, hell, you've even saved her life, but she leaves you no choice. She quiets down real fast after that. She's staring directly in your eyes and you can easily read her thoughts. She probably sees in your eyes that by now, you don't really care. She probably figures that you are the one responsible for the dead people in the room even though that's not true. But hell, if it can keep her quiet, great.

You motion to the rope that you've left behind earlier on, the one sitting right beside the bed. She moves slowly towards it and grabs it. You reach out and grab the rope from her and indicate the kid and, with another quick head movement, you tell her to bring the kid into the kitchen. She catches on quickly, which is a good thing.

She drags the kid to the kitchen and sits him down. You give her the rope and she ties him up to the chair. You tell her to back up and you go and check the knots yourself. She did a good job. You tell her to sit down. It's her turn.

You tie her up nice and tight and tell her to hang tight. You're going to look for a car, for a way out of this town. Even though you're not responsible for half the shit that's gone down, you know that you'll be the one blamed for the mess.

- * -

Darkness. You love this moment, when the last frame of the movie credits has rolled out of the projector and the projectionist hasn't turned on the lights yet. You love

just sitting there, digesting the film and waiting for the real world to come rushing back in.

You see the cleaners come in and so, reluctantly you get up. As you stretch your legs, you try to figure out a way to delay your return to your home. It's not that you don't like your mom, but ever since you guys left the old house and him behind, she's been depressed, a pain to be around.

You could always call Joan and see what she's doing. You're pretty sure she'd be up to just hanging around, talking. Of course, she'd be the one doing all the talking while you'd just stare at her, making small sounds every once in a while, pretending to understand, care about what she has to say. You can tell by how her eyes light up that she really likes you. You even caught her the other day referring to you as her "great listener" to one of her friends.

It's not like you really dig her, but somehow you feel comfortable around her, like all your problems at home are part of another world. Sometimes when she speaks, you can see in your mind the scenes she is describing, like if you were at the movies. In a way, she is your projector and your mind is the blank screen, ready and willing to receive her images.

You met her at the movies a few weeks after you and your mom moved. She was working the ticket counter and you guess that somehow, you caught her eye since she's the one that started talking to you. She asked you if you really loved movies or if you were simply running away from your family since you spent almost as much time there as she did. You laughed and lied, telling her that you loved the pictures, that if you could, you'd spend all your waking hours in front of the silver screen. She just laughed along with you, telling you she understood.

After that fist conversation, she would smile at you every time you would come to the theater. You'd exchange a few words, she'd hand you the ticket and that was that. You could go on and loose yourself in the darkness of the theater, anonymous, unknown, alone.

Then one day, as you were sitting in the dark alone waiting for the movie to start, she sat beside you. Your eyes met but neither of you said anything. She sat there, watching the movie with you. When the movie was over, you simply smiled at her and told her you had to head back home. She smiled back and said it was nice to watch a movie with you.

Afterwards, she would sit with you, watching the movie, every time she was working. You didn't know how she got away with it and, frankly, you didn't really care. At least, you didn't really cared until she took your hand.

You walked her home after that movie and it was then that she told you about her family, about her problems and her aspiration. Turned out that she could pretty much do as she pleased at the theater since her dad owned it.

You started calling her and hanging out with her more after that night. You enjoyed her company and the break from your own family life was nice. You'd always hesitated and changed the subject every time she would ask you about your parents, about your father. Your favorite way of doing this was by quoting a scene from a movie and trying to make her guess what it was. After a few weeks, she understood that you didn't want to talk about your parents and didn't bring it up again.

Did you love Joan? Maybe, in your own way, but that doesn't matter anymore. If she ever saw you on the street, she wouldn't recognize you or at least she would have the decency to pretend she didn't know you. And you know that for a fact.

- * -

Spots. As you step outside, the heat hits you hard and a brief bout of dizziness hits you, shoving colored spots in front of your eyes. You stop, crouch down and take a few deep breath. You know why this is happening and the irony isn't lost on you.

You need some junk and you need it soon. Problem is, you'll need a car to get the hell out of this place and go somewhere where you can get your hands on some. Sure, you have no real idea where this bloody village is at, but you know that the highway will bring you eventually to a big city and once there, you'll let your nose do the walking. You can't hide junk for long from a junkie, he'll always sniff it out, find who's holding.

Your hands have started to shake again and you know you must do something quickly, before the sweats kick in and the pains keep you from doing much of anything.

You really don't care what kind of car you steal, as long as it works and doesn't attract too much attention. Sure, a fine ride is cool, but you know that if a cop sees you in a fancy car, your ass is grass. Gotta keep the image. If a cop sees you in a crappy car, he won't blink an eye and unless you do something stupid, you'll be fine.

After a few minutes, the lack of cars worries you a little bit. How could people living in such a lost town not have cars? It's not like they're actually hiding them in garages or something since you haven't seen any of those either for the last little while. How do these people get around? Do they ever leave or are they stuck here, some strange sort of purgatory between true nature and civilization?

You eventually find a car, an old black car, shining in the night. It reminds you of the first car you bought and along with it the memories of different times before the war, before the accident, before...

You reach for the car handle, trying to figure out a way in if the door is locked, but luckily, you won't need to apply those particular talents now. The door is unlocked. It strikes you how people are trusting in these parts, how they seem to believe that nothing bad can happen here. Of course, they are partly right. Most of the time, the real threats are already in their house, ready to pounce and destroy them. Bogeymen don't exist, at least none that you already don't know.

You hop in the car and dive right away under the drive shaft, looking for the two magical wires that will start this beast. The old skills come back to you quickly and before long, the engine is purring away. You sit straight up, put your hands on the wheel and drive the car carefully back to the house.

As you get out of the car, you leave the engine running. You're not really sure how much gas there is in the tank, but that's ok. You figure that the kid probably has some cash in his pockets if you need to buy some gas on the way, and besides, you always have that gun.

You step back into the house and head for the kitchen. Thinking back, it might have been a better idea to come in with the gun drawn out, just in case, but everything is alright. Everything is just as you left it.

You go to Suzy and untie her, mumbling an apology to her. You toss the rope away in a corner and start untying the kid. He's still out cold and at least he's still breathing, which you figure is a good thing. At least you didn't smack him so hard that you killed him. There's always that.

You tell Suzy to help you drag the kid to the car but she starts arguing with you, saying pleading demanding that you let her go. You make a move towards the gun, trying to scare her a little but that only makes her start screaming again. You pull your hands in front of yourself, waving them towards her palm out and ask her to stop screaming. When she starts quieting down a bit, you tell her that if she helps you drag

the kid back to the car, you'll let her go. It's not like you need her anyway and what's the worse she can do anyway?

You can tell that she wants to ask why, but she stops before the words come out. She actually listens to you and, with her face streaked by smeared mascara, she grabs the kid's legs while you grab him under his armpits. The kid is strangely light in your arms and you make your way, awkwardly, back to the car. You dump the kid in the back seat, untied. He'll probably be out cold for a couple more hours and by then you'll both be way out of the town.

You keep your promise to Suzy and let her go. She smiles at you nervously when you tell her she can go and she backs away, slowly, as if by turning her back to you she would only invite you to harm her or something. When she sees that you've kept your promise and that she's a good distance away, she turns around and starts running, turning the corner at full speed.

You get in the car, behind the wheel and press down on the accelerator. It's time to leave this sorry place, just you, the kid and the empty sky.

- * -

Blood. The first thing that hits you is the amount of blood that can come out of a person. As you stand there in your mother's kitchen, you stare down at her, her broken body lying in a huge pool of her own blood. The blood is too red, the red of bad movies, of bad lighting, of a bad special effect, of unreality.

You stand there for what seems like an eternity. It's a good thing she's already dead when you walk in because your inaction would have killed her anyway. The only thing that keeps on going through your brain is that it isn't real, it's just a bad movie, everything will be alright. Someone, somewhere will yell cut and she'll get up and the scene will wrap.

Guess what. This is real life. She really is dead, her throat ripped from what looks to you like a giant bite.

When the phone rings, it snaps you out of it. It's Joan, wanting to know if you want to hang tonight. You tell her that you can't and then you explain, calmly, the scene to which you came home tonight.

She tells you not to panic (how can you? You can't feel anything), that she'll take care of everything and that the cops will be there very shortly. You hang up and go to sit in the staircase of the apartment building. You don't bother closing the door, since the only thing of value to you is gone anyway.

When the cops finally show up, it's all you can do but stop shaking. She shows up a few minutes later and takes you in her arms. You can feel the tears pushing at your eyes, but the tears won't come. You don't need the cops to tell you who did this. You know already. You saw the broken bottle of cheap gin in the kitchen, its jagged edges covered in gore and blood.

You don't want to cry, you can't cry. You won't give him the satisfaction of hurting you again.

You tell Joan you need to be alone. She seems hurt at first, but she nods, saying she understands and walks away, squeezing your hand before leaving.

You want to be alone. If you are alone, if you have no one, he can't hurt you, he can't take anything away.

You tried living by that rule. At least, that's what you tell yourself, but you know that you caved in, that you allowed others to creep in. And that way, you set yourself up for pain.

Sticky. The vinyl of the wheel sticks to your hands because of the sweat. It's not that you're nervous, but if you weren't holding the wheel right now your hands would be shaking. The sound of the engine calms your nerves a bit, but not enough to really squelch your hunger.

It didn't take you long to get out of the small town, but now you've been driving for a long while with only the moon and your headlight for illumination. Darkness swallows the car as you drive along, the road unfurling in front of you like a paper ribbon. You have no idea where you're going nor where you came from.

You know without looking back that even if you turned around, you wouldn't see the small town behind you. Come morning, the events of this night will just be another memory to you, a stray thought that might have been real, might have been just a junk-fueled dream. Of course, there's always the kid. He's real enough and he came from there.

As you start thinking that you'll never see the light of another town, you can see two pin-prick lights up ahead. Your foot goes down a little harder on the accelerator, trying to make the car go faster but you know you should ease up. Never know what those light might be.

As you get closer, you notice that the two white lights are accompanied by two smaller red light. You can make the silhouette of another black car up ahead. Unlike you, this one is parked on the side of the road.

You wonder if maybe, just maybe, you should stop and see what's going on. Maybe you can help the person, or maybe you can help yourself to their money. Some extra cash in your pockets might not be a bad idea. You might be weak and shaky right now, but you do have the gun.

As you lean forward to try and make out the car better, you can hear some movement behind you. As you turn to see what's going on, you can feel the kid pushing you forward. You can't turn your head and see him clearly, but you can feel his ragged breath on the back of your neck.

You try to nail him with your elbow, yelling at him to calm the fuck down, but you miss and he doesn't. He hits you squarely in back of the head, pushing your head towards the wheel. He's not that strong, but that doesn't matter. Your foot started pushing harder on the gas and as much as you tried to steer the car, you didn't see the car parked on the side of the road pulling out.

Your car slams hard into the other one. You never saw him, he probably never saw you. The last thing you see before passing out is the kid flying above you, head first towards the windshield.

Epilogue

CAR INTERIOR, NIGHT. A MAN IS SLUMPED OVER THE WHEEL OF THE CAR.

Startled, he awoke, as if something had pricked him. He pushed himself away from the wheel, shook his head and rubbed the sleep from his eyes, his hands coming back gummy with his blood. Unsure of where he was, he ran his hand on the black passenger seat, noticing that it was made of vinyl, not leather as he had first assumed. He noticed because the vinyl had stuck to his hand, maybe from the blood, maybe from the heat, stopping its gliding along the surface. He looked around, trying to see something apart from just silhouettes in the night. He looked in the back of the car, expecting to see someone. Of course, the car was empty except for himself.

Squinting, Cary tried to see where he was exactly. He could not see clearly in the night, but nonetheless, the memories of the accident came back to him quickly. He hadn't seen the car coming and when he pulled back into the road, the impact came quickly. He figured that he must have hit his head when the car went spinning a few times.

He stepped out of the car, legs wobbly. Cary looked around and could see the other car, black as the night, sitting not too far away. The light of the moon revealed the black marks on the road, scratch marks in the tarmac from desperately slammed on breaks, from high-speed impact.

As he was making his way towards the other car, he could see a body lying on the ground 10, 20 feet away. Not stopping at the car, figuring that this was the driving, Cary went to see if the man, boy was still alive.

Cary
(talking to the boy)

[Kneeling by the body] Hey [he prods the body lightly with his hand. The body flops over, revealing a mess of flesh and blood, the skin ripped off] Well, I guess you ain't alive boy. For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I never saw you...

Cary got up slowly and turned towards the car. The windshield was a mess, a spiderweb of broken glass, a bullet-hole in the forehead of the car. By the faint moonlight he could see another shape in the car. Cary got up and made his way to the car, slowly at first but then picking up the pace.

Before he made it to the car, he could see the shape behind the wheel starting to move and shift around.

Cary
(yelling)

Hey! Hey! Are you alright? Are you hurt? Maybe you should stay put. Wait, I'm almost there. I'll see if I can help...

As he got closer, Cary could make out the face of the driver despite all the blood. He figured that the driver had also hit his head on the steering wheel. Cary picked up the pace a little more, trying to get to the car before the guy could come out.

The door to the car opened slowly and the driver came out, wobbly at first, but then with a little more assurance. Cary stopped, staring at the man. It was the wino from

the Diner. As Cary raised a hand to tell him to stay put, he saw the wino raise a gun to him.

Cary
(to wino)

Whoa, whoa, there buddy... it's an accident. I didn't see you coming... you don't want to do something you'll regret...

Wino
(slightly slurred)

You killed her. It's all your fault. If you hadn't...

Cary
(puzzled)

What? Yeah, the kid is dead, but... it wasn't my fault. I never saw... and you were coming so fast.

Wino
(yelling)

You bastard! Don't you try and... don't! You're just like her! Just like them! It's all my fault, I'll bet... You... you...

Cary

[Backing away, holding his hands up in front of him]!... it's not what I'm saying. It's just an accident. It's no one's fault, really.

Wino

[Raises the gun and pulls back the hammer]You killed my little girl. It's only fair that you pay for that...

Cary

[Falls to his knees.]Don't. Please.

Click. The sound of the hammer falling back on an empty chamber, yet Cary fell forward, clutching his chest. The wino stood there, his mouth moving into what? A smile? A frown? Emptiness?

The wino brought the gun up, pressed it against his head and pulled back. This time, the click of the hammer was accompanied by a loud detonation as half of the wino's head disappeared, erased by the action of the gun.