



ONE OR MORE CHARACTERS ARE TRAVELING IN SOME KIND OF VEHICLE TOWARDS A SPECIFIC, PLANNED DESTINATION. FOR SOME REASON, THEY FAIL TO ARRIVE AT THEIR INTENDED DESTINATION...

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## Note from the Co-Publisher

March 3, 2007

Almost exactly one year ago today, I had the idea for a contest-based web fiction magazine. I had several potential titles in mind, but all the relevant domain names were taken. Then I thought of On The Premises and never looked back.

A year later, we publish our first issue.

Our first contest gave us 68 submissions to read. The submissions were just what we had hoped for: they were all over the map with regard to genre and style. We said we are not limiting our published fiction to any one kind of genre, and we stand by that. But we've learned a few things about our tastes that we didn't know before, and have updated our writer's guidelines accordingly.

Also, our original idea to have our judges act as guest writers does not seem to be catching on. Personally, I want to sell my fiction, not self-publish, so my work will probably not appear here any time soon. Other judges have their own reasons. So, we are rethinking the guest writer concept. Stay tuned.

Another change: the *Ideas@OnThePremises.com* mailbox has been changed to *Feedback@OnThePremises.com*. You can still submit ideas about the website, but you can also send feedback about the stories, the cartoons, or anything else about our magazine.

Okay, enough blather. On with the stories! And be sure to check out the cartoons our illustrator, Francis Heaney, provided. We intend to feature his work in every issue. We hope you like it as much as we do.

Keep writing and keep reading!

Tarl Roger Kudrick, co-publisher of *On The Premises* magazine

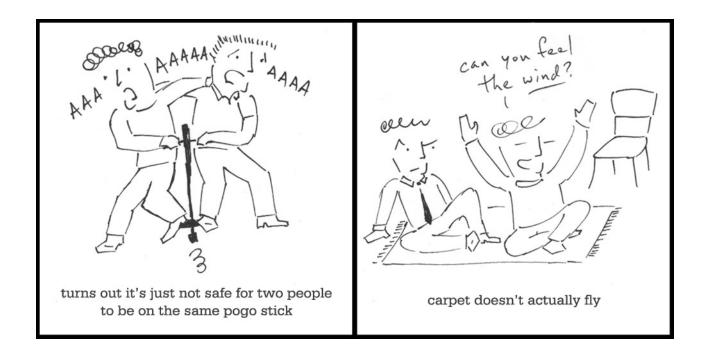
# Cartoons!

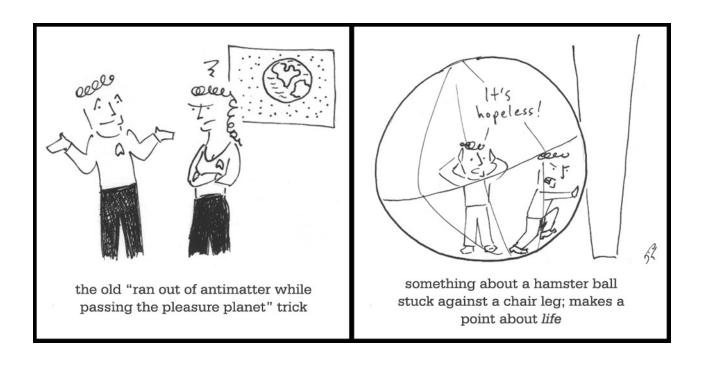
#### by Francis J. Heaney (art and writing)

Lots of people (well, okay, nobody) asked us if the reason why a story's main characters don't get where they're going could be really stupid, and still win. We said no, but it got us thinking. As a result, we now bring you Francis Heaney's index of...

#### plots that probably won't win this contest







#### FIRST PLACE

A'Llyn Ettien has red hair and lives outside Boston. She fully expects this story to win her legions of adoring fans who will shower her with presents and allow her to retire in luxury, but in the meantime is studying to be a librarian.

A'Llyn has previously been published in *QuantumMuse*, *Nanobison*, and *Knights of the Dinner Table*.

### Friends in Need

by A'Llyn Ettien

In the back of the cop car, in handcuffs, Amy felt surreally out of place. From everything leading up to this, her mind kept replaying the bit where the young cop—younger than she was, barely more than a kid—said "ma'am, you are under arrest." In her head his enunciation splintered, clearer and sharper with each repetition, until every syllable was weirdly distinct, like individual slivers of glass.

Then she would think "how the hell did this happen?" and a heated wave of

shame, more social embarrassment than regret, really, would flood over her and blur things out until the replay started up again: "Ma'am, you are un-der ar-rest."

Arrested! How was she going to explain this to the kids, and how was she going to be able to scold them with any authority when *they* got in trouble? And as far as that went, part of her protested indignantly, they hadn't arrested the guy. Sure, arrest the two women and let the guy walk off. It was elementary school all over again, when she used to get in trouble for fighting while her brother got a pass.

On the other hand, Sang was the one who smashed the guy's face with a mug of beer for, if she was going to be completely honest, no evident reason. Pushing her memory past the part it kept skipping on ("ma'am, you are under arrest"), she looked for the grave insult that must have turned Sang from relaxed drinking companion to raging bar-brawler. Something slimy in the way the guy slid up beside them at the bar, maybe? She didn't get much from him one way or the other, not even a checking-out glance as he filled in the space next to Sang, attention forward to the bartender. Just one medium-sized, unremarkable slab of average guy, as best she remembered, and then he—what, he had jostled Sang slightly and turned with a polite smile, an "oh, sorry," and Sang shot him a glance, not even really paying attention, and then there was a tense half-second where Amy's focus shrank down to a point on an odd stiff chill in Sang's posture. And then Sang swept her mug off the bar and into his face, left handed across her body, as if she'd been practicing.

Then background shouting, encouraging hoots of 'fight' from somewhere down the bar, flailing arms, and Amy snatched up her own mug and smacked the guy in the head as he grabbed hold of Sang, and he went down. More shouting, and she thought he came up again...yes, there it was, she'd broken the glass over his head this time, and blood—quite a bit of blood—was instantly all over him, as if it had been in the mug instead of in his head. For some reason she recalled his hair starting to spike up and get crusty in sections, which had seemed interesting at the time. More flailing, and Sang grabbed her arm as if to tug her off somewhere to the back of the bar, but the crowd gave way in front instead and there stood the law. Amy froze up, Sang was yelling something, and "Ma'am, you"— skip that, skip that. She had seen the guy sitting up as the cops hustled them out, waving off concerned members of the crowd, so presumably he was more or less OK. She felt vaguely guilty in retrospect; she'd gotten into some stupid shoving matches, but she'd never made anyone bleed before. Honestly, she didn't see Sang's problem with him, but it must have been some previous issue, from when she knew him in other circumstances.

The siren came on, near and shocking inside the car, and she blinked and looked up, aware of her stiff face suddenly, as if it were a dazed mask. Were they in that big a hurry to get to the police station?

In the headlights an old sedan, weaving slightly, picked up speed.

"What's going on?" she whispered, casting a glance sideways. Sang's face looked unfamiliar, carved into strange, mobile angles by the shifting streetlight cast through the back window. Amy, looking at her, reflected that she didn't actually know her neighbor that well. Maybe she'd owed the guy money.

"It's a high-speed chase." Sang's voice was low and a little hoarse, but mockingly formal. Amy vaguely recalled someone's arm around Sang's throat, dragging her off the guy. It must have bruised. "They suspect the driver of that automobile may perhaps be intoxicated."

"Quiet back there!" snapped one of the cops. The older one, driving. Sang gave the suggestion of an eye-roll, like a conspiratorial child barely tolerating the grown-ups, and Amy recognized the always-entertaining person she had gone to the bar with, though now overlaid with a foreign cast.

Ahead, the speeding sedan veered right and sideswiped a guardrail. Brake lights flared, the car wobbled back into the lane, and then pulled right again and came to a jerky stop on the shoulder. The cop car pulled in behind, sirens shutting off.

"Sit tight, ladies." The cops shrugged off their seat belts and got out of the car.

Amy glared after them as the older one paced in measured cop fashion up to shine his flashlight into the sedan window, the younger one waiting alertly near what she absently thought of as 'their' car. ("Ma'am, you are under arrest.")

"So," said Sang, her tone conversational. "Why did you hit him?"

Amy blinked sideways, pulling her gaze from the scene ahead. "You did."

"And if I jumped off a bridge...?" Amy heard a mixture of amusement and disbelief in her voice, which seemed not exactly appropriate to the situation.

"Well, no, but—you're not an irrational-violence kind of person, so I figured if you thought he needed hitting, you must have a good reason."

Sang's head dropped, casting her face into shadow, and she gave Amy a sidelong look through wisps of hair. "You're a good friend."

Amy waited, wanting but not wanting to ask Sang's own reason, and then for a minute they both watched the unfolding drama centered on the car ahead, whose driver, visibly unsteady on his feet, had emerged and was vehemently declaring outrage and innocence. Scattered words drifted back to them from the rushing stream, drawing the younger cop forward. He was pretty good at looking cool but watchful. Amy thought that next time Sang said "you look bored and listless—let's go out and have a drink!" she would say no. Even though she *had* been bored and listless, for weeks now really, and had enjoyed being out with a friend, and had felt something almost like exhilaration at the prospect of doing something *different*, when the fight came up. Adrenaline could be fun. When it wore off and left you in the back seat of a police car with spilled beer down your front…less so.

("Ma'am, you are under arrest.")

"Well," said Sang, "let's get out of here, shall we?"

"What are you talking about? We're locked in. And in handcuffs." She rattled them for emphasis, still not entirely believing they were real.

"S'OK," said Sang. "Give me your hands."

So maybe Sang was an escape artist, and could cleverly pick the lock. Who knew? Not that running into the woods would improve anything. Resisting arrest and all that. Amy slouched into the seat. Creaky vinyl. Probably easy to clean. Cut down on spilled beer stains and whatever.

"They'll track us down and we'll get in more trouble for running than if we just sit here."

Sang looked over her shoulder through the back window, apparently uneasy for the first time that evening. "They haven't booked us yet. They don't even know our names."

It had not occurred to Amy that cops wouldn't know their names.

"That's why they arrested us so fast," Sang said patiently. "I wouldn't cooperate when they asked for ID."

Oh yeah. Sang *had* been shouting something confrontational that Amy had been too stricken to register.

"And you keep yours in your shoe. Amy, no one in that bar is going to be able to identify us. If we get away now, we'll be fine."

Amy thought that might be true, but there were a lot of ifs involved. The reckless energy that got her into Sang's fight in the first place was fading fast. She watched the show ahead, where the sedan's driver was now failing spectacularly to demonstrate his mastery of a Roadside Sobriety Test.

Sang sighed, and answered the unspoken question. "*I* hit him because he was looking for me, and I couldn't let him get a good identification. He's a searcher, and they collect pieces of information—reactions, expressions, the way you do things. They latch onto you and just watch and wait until you do something that puts the last piece in place so they know it's you. You can't fool them over time, so you just have to smack them down as soon as you recognize them, then get away."

"No, but I've seen the look." Sang sighed again. "I have to get out of here."

Amy stared at her. Great. She'd gotten arrested helping a paranoid weirdo beat up a total stranger. "And why was he looking for you?"

Sang looked back, face earnest and alien, a complete stranger in vaguely familiar skin. "It's kind of like the army. If you have the talent, they just conscript you. We're all supposed to spend our lives working on the Gateway Out of Here. But you know, some of us don't so much care about getting out of here, so we'd rather spend our lives doing other things."

Amy chewed her lower lip, the better to make a noncommittal face. "Who...conscripts you?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;So you knew him?"

Sang, unexpectedly, laughed. "It's a good thing you're not a psychiatrist or something. You'd have to look understanding and sympathetic about peoples' loony ravings, and you're not that good at it."

Amy flushed. "It's not that, it's just--"

"It's OK. I know, it's insane. I don't even have time to explain it, but it's like--you know *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*?"

"Sure." Amy had been a loyal follower until she started skipping TV to work nights, and then the baby...

"It's not that, I'm not saying *that's* exactly true--although for all I know it is--but it's sort of *like* that."

She looked though the back window again.

"The basic point is that there are things that look like magic co-existing with the reality-based world we know and love, and most people never notice. Which is also magic, right? But some people can see it and work with it, and among them there's basically this royal line, and everyone else is supposed to obey them. Because of the royal power and everything. It's very feudal. They have this project to move on from the earth to the whatever is next and better, and everyone who can is supposed to be working on it. You can't decline, right?—because they're the law, they're the nobility. But hell with them, I want to live my own life, so I ran off. Now I pretty much live on the run, since they just keep trying to track down everyone who might be useful. They don't like to miss out on potential labor, you know."

With a clink of handcuffs, she put her hands up to press the sides of her head, looking weary.

"Of course, you can't know that my perspective is right, what do you know about the politics of this 'ooh, magic!' world you can't even see? Even if it's true, I could just be a criminal slacker evading my appointed role. But you're a good friend, and you stood by me once tonight, so maybe you'll help me again." Amy didn't bother with the noncommittal face. She watched the latest installment of the sedan driver's saga, in which the protagonist gives up attempting to walk a straight line and makes a break for the trees, both cops in pursuit. Lukewarm pursuit, it looked like; the cops were jogging, not sprinting, and the would-be escapee, having lost one shoe, seemed about to fall over at every other step. It must be pretty prickly out there in the underbrush, Amy thought.

After a few seconds she turned back to Sang. "I have to be honest—I think you're a raving loon. But you've always been a good neighbor, so whatever, tell me what you need and I'll help you as much as I can."

Sang's face seemed to literally light up in relief and joy, shadows melting off her skin. Amy felt better; any decision that could make someone look so happy must stand a good chance of being the right one. Even if Sang was insane, she might as well be happy, right?

"Just lend me some focus, that's all. I had too much to drink to pull it together on my own." Sang held out her hands again.

The request made no sense, of course, but this was hardly the time to start worrying about that, and after a moment Amy reached across the seat to take Sang's hands. Cold, dry fingers squeezed painfully tight, and Amy felt a weird, ticklish suction, as if something were being skimmed off the surface of her skin. She shivered, and it stopped.

Sang pressed Amy's hands together, sandwiched between her own palms. "Like that, but let it go. Pay attention to the direction."

Amy tried to imagine she was letting go of direction, or something. The sense of skimming resumed, and Sang's hands grew warmer, almost feverish.

"Shhh." Sang's face was distant, and blurry. Amy stared, then squinted, trying to bring her back into focus, but she seemed to be dissolving. The solidity of the world, which she had never much bothered to be aware of, began to drop away around her, peeling off on all sides in almost-visible layers, like segments from a

<sup>&</sup>quot;Sang, are you OK?"

giant orange. She clutched at Sang's hands, but they seemed to have turned to wisps of down in her fingers, and she could hardly feel them. Her head was spinning. And the car was – underneath her somehow, very far underneath her, flashing lights tiny and distant on the side of the tiny, distant road.

("Ma'am, you are....")

A trail of streetlights arced along the line of Sang's back. She tried to speak, but seemed to be made of air, with no way to shape words. Or possibly she was water, and the whole world was water, rushing by, clear and chill.

She scraped through leafless fall branches, sweeping into the ground somewhere. There was a taste of wind and dust, then a growing bitterness in the back of her mouth. She thought she recognized the reedy patch behind her house, and Sang's clothesline, and then she was standing on the ground, holding Sang's hands. Sang pulled away. Amy wavered and sat down hard.

She was solid. The ground was very solid. Their abrupt meeting knocked her teeth together, and bumped her tailbone. Ow. She was not in the back of a cop car, which was really no less strange, she supposed, than having been in one in the first place. No handcuffs in evidence, that part felt right. Sang was...probably solid, though it was hard to be certain since she was doubled over a few feet away, throwing up as if everything inside her had to come out immediately.

"Are you OK?" Amy hunched herself a little closer. The retching sounds were making her queasy as well, and she was leery of getting too near, but didn't want to be unsympathetic.

Sang, barely visible in the dimness—her back porch light was supposed to be motion sensitive, but apparently the detector had broken again—waved her off. After a couple of minutes she stopped heaving and sat back.

They sat in silence for a while, and then Amy, for lack of a better idea, pushed herself to her feet. "We should go inside," she said. "It's getting chilly."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Always the worst motion sickness ever," she said weakly.

She took Sang's hand (solid) and hauled her to her feet, and they made their way, weaving unsteadily, to the back door. Footsteps clumsy on the wooden step: solid. As Sang fumbled with the key, the porch bulb came on, lighting up her pinched and tired face.

Amy steered her into the kitchen to a seat at the table. "Tea?" she asked. "Water? Aspirin?"

"Just water, thanks," Sang said as her head drooped forward onto a stack of magazines. Amy filled a glass and set it near Sang's elbow, and she raised her head and sipped feebly. Amy, hovering, wanted to do something else. She now felt jittery and energetic, and peeked out the window. Then she pulled the curtains closed. The little kitchen felt out of place around her, more distinct and real than it had any right to. The beams of the overhead light reflecting off the battered tabletop should have had weight against her arms.

"Probably." Sang's head was on the table again, her voice muffled by her arm. "If I'm still here, I mean. He won't bother if I'm gone."

"Better you don't know." Sang looked up over her own arm. "Not to get all mysterious on you or anything."

Amy sat down. "Can you even go anywhere? You look kind of sick."

"No, I'll be fine. I just need a few minutes to recuperate." She finished the water.

"Thanks for the help. You're a good friend. I'll miss you."

She kept saying that. If it were true, Sang must not have many friends. Not that Amy had a ton herself.

"I wish I could go with you." Her own remark startled her, and she suspected herself of lying. But no, she did wish it: to be a good friend, to leave the boredom of her own life, to learn more about the hidden world of 'oooh, magic!'

<sup>&</sup>quot;Is that guy going to come around here?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Where will you go?"

Sang looked at her doubtfully. "I suppose you could..."

The possibility shimmered between them for a moment, tempting and new. Then Amy shook her head.

"I couldn't just run off and leave my kids. And trying to take them would be way too hard."

Sang nodded. "You're right. Honestly, it's not much of a life to drag a friend into anyway." She smiled. "Maybe another time."

"Come back when I'm 55 and the kids are all grown up and never call me," said Amy. "I mean, I always did want to get more involved with freaky invisible politics. Ask anyone."

Sang laughed. "I'll see what I can do."

She got up, less shaky than before, and began roaming through the small house, tossing things into a bag. Amy made a few hasty peanut butter sandwiches. She felt ravenously hungry as she worked, and ate three spoonfuls of peanut butter, which was the richest, deepest, roundest thing she'd ever tasted. Shockingly quickly, while Amy was still marveling at the wonder that was Store Brand Chunky, Sang stood with packed bags in hand, hesitating on her own threshold.

"Take anything you want from the house," she said. "Not that there's anything great, but if you need extra silverware or a radio or anything. Work or the landlord will probably report me missing in a few days, and the cops might come and ask if you've seen me. You can tell them whatever you want, but they'll think you're less insane if you just say you didn't know me that well and have no idea where I went."

"And look extra-specially law-abiding so they don't recognize you, if it turns out to be the same cops." Sang gave her a worried glance, but Amy shrugged. Cops now seemed the least interesting of the things she had to think about.

<sup>&</sup>quot;OK." It all seemed indecently sudden and shifty.

Sang looked around the room one last time, and Amy followed her to the door. "Well...good luck."

Sang smiled. "I'll see you in 15 or 20 years, then."

And standing at the kitchen door, still technically under arrest, Amy thought she really would.

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#### SECOND PLACE

Stephen lives and works as a sign maker in the UK. His interest in writing stories began in the late nineties when he started writing for the school nursery his children attended. Four years ago he finished his first short horror story. He hasn't written a child's story since.

Stephen's fiction has previously been published in *Thirteen*, *Dark of Night*, *Albedo One* and on the *Wicked Stories* website.

### Nathan's Last Lift

by Stephen Owen

"Getting darker in the mornings now, huh?" Nathan said. "And colder."

I didn't even consider responding.

He scratched between his legs and leaned forward. The seat belt locked, but he reached out, tapping the clock face twice.

"Still ten minutes fast then?"

He'd said it every day since he'd put it forward last Monday.

"Yeah," I grunted. Stating the obvious was Nathan's specialty. It was one of the million reasons I hated him so much.

"So, is it working?" he said.

"What's it supposed to prove?"

"Well, when you get there and find out that you're not really late at all and you've actually gained ten minutes to what you thought you had, you feel so... what's the word? Well, whatever it is, at least you've still got time to put the kettle on and make yourself a nice cup of tea before you start work."

"I have a cup of tea before I start work no matter what time I arrive - where did you get this from?"

"Um, I read it in one of my mum's magazines, I think. Does it work?"

"Not really."

Nathan looked at me with arched eyebrows and pursed lips. He folded his arms and tilted his head. Why didn't he just ask me why not, instead of going all gay on me?

"If I was a goldfish with a memory span of about five seconds," I said, "I guess it might, but unfortunately I'm not. I remember the clock's fast all the time, so it doesn't work."

"Oh," Nathan said, as if I'd said the most hurtful thing in the world. He turned to look out the window and stared into the darkness beyond his dopey reflection.

I sighed, fumbling for the radio switch. Bloody Nathan. He was Debbie's idea.

\*

"You could give him a lift," she called up the stairs one morning. "He'd appreciate that."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You're meant to think you're running late..."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Yeah, I sort of guessed that," I said.

<sup>&</sup>quot;So you rush to work as fast as you can..."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Why?"

"Appreciate it? He'll love it!" I screamed back through a mouthful of foaming toothpaste.

"Now that's not fair – that poor man hasn't got any friends..."

"Ah... ah...let me stop you right there, Debbie." I raised my right hand like a traffic cop to my reflection in the bathroom mirror and looked myself in the eye. "There's a reason why people like Nathan don't have any friends..."

"Well, you're going to tell me anyway," she said, in the kitchen now judging by the sound of clattering cutlery.

"Because they are usually the most boring bastards in the world," I yelled. "People like Nathan Cox have ended up in social solitary confinement for a reason--and what's worse, they put themselves there--I don't feel sorry for him at all."

I thought I heard a plate smash somewhere downstairs.

\*

*Hotel California* by the Eagles was playing on my car radio. It used to be a good track, you know. Probably still is, but I've heard it too many times now. When you hear something a million times, the novelty wears off.

Nathan sat there playing *bet you blink first* with his reflection, stroking his lunch box on his lap, like it was a big square plastic cat.

"That's the bus stop you used to wait at isn't it?" I nodded toward a queue of faceless people on his side of the street.

"Yes, that's right--twenty-eight minutes past six it was meant to arrive, but it was never there before twenty-five to seven. I had to be at the train station for six forty-five to make the connection."

<sup>&</sup>quot;And what's that?" said Debbie.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Because nobody likes them...and you wanna know why?"

"Yeah?" I felt a yawn coming on.

"Yes. One morning, I got so angry, I told the driver this was supposed to be the six twenty-eight not the six thirty-five and if he didn't pull his socks up I'd be reporting him."

"Did you?"

Christ, this wasn't just any old yawn brewing here. It was a really big please-shut-up-and-die-Nathan-you're-just-about-the-most-boring-bastard-I-ever-met yawn. Resistance was useless. I had to let it out.

Nathan looked at me.

"Do you know what a yawn actually is?" he said.

"Hmmm? No... I don't."

"It means you're about to fall asleep."

"Yeah?" My eyes were starting to go bleary now.

"The brain sends a message to the lungs requesting an emergency boost of oxygen so it can wake up again."

"Does it?" My voice sounded flat and uninterested.

"Yes, it does."

"Amazing," I said, then yawned again.

This one was even bigger than the last.

\*

The first time he called at twenty minutes past six. Call me naïve, but I thought it was safe to have a shit at that time in the morning without being disturbed.

"Oh, that'll be Nathan," Debbie said. "I told him you'd give him a lift today."

"Tell him to wait in the hallway whilst I wipe my ass," I yelled. Unfortunately, my bathroom is at the front of the house and the window was open. Nathan heard me.

Of course, Debbie had to apologize. "Take no notice of him Nathan--he's always grumpy in the morning."

Even though I couldn't see him, I knew he'd be nodding his head, frowning and giving her that ever-so-concerned look. "I know exactly what you mean," he'd whisper, his understanding fingers resting gently on her shoulder. "He's just the same at work."

That was over three months ago. He never called at twenty past six again, thanks to Debbie's amazing decorum. Christ, that silly woman has a way with words.

"He always takes a dump around quarter past and doesn't come out for at least ten minutes," she told him. "So it's not a good time. He stinks the place out."

"Oh, fine," Nathan said, grinning from ear to ear, bucked teeth sticking out of his mouth like a deck of blank playing cards. "I'll remember that."

So he used his initiative. The following morning he arrived at six o'clock, smashing the shit out of my front door like an over-enthusiastic cop with a sledgehammer out on his first dawn raid.

Nathan grinned as I opened the door.

"Morning," he said, squeezing past me. "Have you heard the news?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Someone at the door!" she shouted.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Oh right...you don't say? I'll get it then, shall I?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;No--what's happened?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I don't know--I haven't seen it yet...all right if I turn the TV on?"

I grimaced, closed the front door and slowly turned around. He was already sitting in my chair, with my remote control, flicking through the programs. I gritted my teeth and walked over to the chair by the window.

"This digital TV is great isn't it?" he said.

"It's rubbish," I said. "I'm thinking about having it taken out."

Nathan didn't hear me. He was too busy changing channels, looking for the news.

In the end we saw about five seconds of it, same as we did every other channel. Nathan was enjoying himself so much, he spent the next quarter hour pressing buttons on the control and chuckling.

"Would you like some tea and toast, Nathan?" Debbie called from the kitchen.

"Oh, yes please, that would be lovely." He beamed at me as if I'd asked him the question.

"I'm not a ventriloquist or a female impersonator," I said. "So don't bloody look at me."

Nathan looked perplexed.

"Anyway." I stood up and patted my ass. "You help yourself to anything you want down here mate, I'm going upstairs now for my shit – but, of course, you know that don't you?"

As I walked toward the stairs he suddenly burst out laughing.

"Oh very good." He guffawed like a donkey. "Very good...very good..."

\*

The never-ending *Hotel California* defied all the laws of physics and finally finished. I'd managed to stop yawning. "I guess my brain's got enough oxygen now, huh?" I said without taking my eyes of the road.

Nathan ignored me and folded his arms.

A voice on the radio warned of an accident a few miles ahead, on the M40 near the Polish War Memorial. Apparently, a mile-long backup had formed and it wasn't even seven o'clock yet.

I sighed and shook my head. I didn't mind being stuck in a traffic jam and I certainly didn't give a shit about being late for work, but I did care about being stuck inside this car with only Nathan to talk to for the next couple of hours.

In the distance a golden sun crawled over the horizon in a peach-colored sky. It looked beautiful, it really did, but I never saw it that way anymore. These days, first light meant only one thing: Nathan's bloody weather forecast.

His face glistened with anticipation in the amber light as he unfolded his arms. "Yes, it's definitely getting colder," he said.

"Is it? I hadn't noticed," I mumbled.

"Oh yes, winter's on the way."

"Really?" Another yawn was on its way.

"Yes, I shouldn't be surprised if we get snow, you know."

I was dying to repeat "snow" in his girly-gay voice, but I was too busy wrestling with another monster yawn slowly squeezing its way up my esophagus toward my dying brain.

Nathan noticed. "How much did you have to drink last night?"

"What?"

"You know what I mean." He tilted his head again. "Don't think I haven't smelled your breath in the mornings."

"Eh? What are you going on about?"

Nathan looked back at the sky; his eyes glinted red.

"You can still be drunk the morning afterwards, you know. It's dangerous and irresponsible."

There was a pause.

Somewhere in the distance a police siren wailed.

"Not to mention...illegal." He smiled.

I shook my head and stuck my indicator on. We were approaching the M40.

Were all the bus stop people like Nathan? Or was I just unlucky here? If I'd been able to take my pick out of that queue of people, would the result have been any different? Or did God create thousands of bus stop people who had no choice but to talk complete shit to each other while they waited for the six-twenty eight which never arrived before twenty-five to seven? Perhaps mind-numbing conversations about the weather and the stench of each other's breath in the mornings were all part of these people's programming; they were like those dolls with cords hanging out the back of their necks who say the same things over and over again.

"Don't go down there, you'll end up in High Wycombe again." He giggled and waved his stupid skinny arms all over the place.

The car swerved as one of his hands slapped my face. We screeched off the roundabout, cutting up Christ knows how many cars, the smell of burning rubber trailing behind us in a cloud of thick black smoke and blaring horns. Nathan's precious lunch box crashed to the floor, its sacred contents spilling at his feet as the car zigzagged down the road towards the motorway. My hands clamped tightly round the steering wheel. It was either that or Nathan's throat.

"Oh, I hope the peanut butter sandwich isn't squashed," he said.

"Fuck your peanut butter sandwich--you nearly killed us back there! This is your last lift Nathan--you got that? After today I'm never driving you to work again."

Nathan's bottom lip went out like a sulking kid.

"What about getting home today?" he said, shoveling his precious lunch back into its box.

I never answered.

We drove the next ten miles in complete silence.

\*

Orange hazards and flashing blue lights twinkled and blinked in the hazy distance like fairy lights. The guy on the radio said somebody had fallen asleep at the wheel of a school bus. My lips tightened as I muttered something about the driver being an inconsiderate bastard. Lord Nathan cut me one of his pompous looks.

"Do you think anybody's been killed?" he said.

"Probably."

"Why do you think he fell asleep?"

"I don't know and I don't really care."

Nathan sighed.

"Can I change radio stations?" he said. "I don't like listening to this traffic report stuff."

"Do what you like," I said. "It's your last lift."

Nathan grinned. He looked like Goofy, the cartoon dog. He leaned forward and tapped the clock again.

"Still ten minutes fast," he said, beaming. "You're not going to be as late as you thought."

\*

Christ knows what station he'd tuned into. It was some kind of Country and Western shit, and worse still, he'd started wailing along with it. It was obvious he

didn't know the words or the tune, but that didn't seem to matter to him. He just made it up as he went along. Out-of-time fingernails mindlessly rapping on his plastic lunch box, desperately trying to keep pace with his high-pitched warble.

It was like torture.

Nathan's tuneless voice turned my stomach. It wasn't just the ear-bending noise that was driving me nuts, it was the thick gooey way it was filling up my car, like deadly poisonous exhaust fumes pouring through his unsightly tombstone teeth.

Enough was enough. I closed my eyes and pressed my foot to the floor.

Nathan stopped singing.

"What are you doing?"

I ignored him.

"Is it something I said?" He raised his voice this time, above the roaring engine.

I nearly laughed at that; it was probably the most rhetorical question I'd ever heard.

I opened my eyes and saw the traffic queue hurtling toward us like a runaway train. It was less than thirty seconds away. My foot felt like it weighed a hundred pounds and stayed glued to the floor.

"I think it's just about everything you said," I said.

Then he was screaming, tugging at my leg in a desperate attempt to get it off the accelerator. I jabbed my elbow in his face and he fell backwards, yelping like a dog.

"You're mad," he shouted. "Bloody mad!"

"Shut the hell up--ouch!" Nathan's lunch box smacked the back of my head.

"We're going to crash!" he screamed.

That's the idea Nathan--let's slam into severe congestion and see what it feels like!

I never even heard what happened. I just remember a violent juddering noise before we plowed into cold silent darkness. In the end it was just like somebody turning off an electric light, or a TV set.

\*

Thump... thump...

There was that sound again, like an air lock in a water pipe. It was the same vicious vibrating noise I'd experienced just before I crashed the car.

Where was Nathan? This was his fault.

Somewhere inside my head was still juddering like a headache trying to smash its way out of my skull. I felt like I wanted to puke. Was this what it was like to be dead? Had I lived twenty-seven years for this?

I sat up and rubbed my eyes. Christ, my head hurt.

I glared at an out-of-focus clock. Blurred green digital numbers glowing like cat's eyes that looked like they said six o'clock, which really meant ten to six, didn't it?

Where was Nathan? Was he dead too?

I fumbled aimlessly between my feet in search of my long lost boxers. My hand was working like one of those grabbing machines you get at the arcades, where there's never quite enough grip to hold on to the prize. Forward. Sideways. Down and grab. Nope, no underpants here, just a load of cold empty beer cans clattering beneath my grasping fingers.

The radio was on. Somebody was talking about an accident on the M40, telling me to avoid the area, unless it was absolutely necessary.

I let out a long and desperate sigh.

The thumping noise wasn't coming from inside my head at all. It was bloody Nathan hammering on my front door.

"Jesus... that was so real."

Debbie rolled over and peeped out from beneath the bed covers. She looked at me in the darkness, her features almost non-existent apart from two black circles for eyes. She looked a bit like an alien.

"Your friend's getting earlier and earlier," she said. "Can't you do something about him?"

"Don't worry," I said, reaching for my dressing gown. "I think I've got an idea..."

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## THIRD PLACE

Mark Tullius lives in South Carolina, but he seems to know something about the long, narrow highways between California and Nevada the rest of us are probably glad we don't.

Mark has previously been published in *Thou Shalt Not, Black Ink Horror, Raw Meat*, and several other anthologies and magazines.

### Out There

by Mark Tullius

"There she goes."

"What?"

Darrell glanced in the rearview mirror and cocked a thumb over his shoulder. "Check it out."

"Keep your eyes on the road," Matt warned as he turned to look out the rainstreaked back window. The small cluster of lights that comprised Baker was disappearing as they followed the curve up the steep hill. In another fifty yards, the insignificant city would vanish completely, leaving them with only their headlights and the occasional burst of lightning to alleviate the darkness of the desert.

"Exactly seventy-nine miles to Vegas," Darrell said, sneaking another peek in the mirror.

"Fine, but watch the road. And slow down."

"Stop trippin', man, I got it."

Matt leaned over and checked the speedometer. "Drop it to sixty."

"I'm barely doing seventy."

"I don't care what the speed limit is. I can't see a goddamn thing with all this rain, and the last thing in the world we need is an accident."

Darrell eased up a little on the accelerator but not without restating his opinion. "We're never gonna get there at this rate."

"Just relax. There's no rush."

"Whatever," Darrell said as he turned the radio up, a signal their conversation was at an end.

Matt pulled the phone out of his pocket and flipped it open. One bar faded in and out. He expected better reception once they made it over the next mountain. He put the phone away, leaned back in the seat, and relaxed as the pounding rain rocked the vehicle.

Darrell slammed the radio's power button with his palm.

"What the hell? You trying to break it?"

"Might as well with all this static. Look at this thing. It doesn't even have a CD player."

"We'll be there soon."

"It handles like crap. And it looks like it belongs to my mom."

"Exactly."

"What?"

"It's supposed to look like a family vehicle. What'd you want, a bright red convertible?"

"Anything would be better than this thing. And think about all the gas we're using. This thing probably gets fifteen per gallon."

"Have you ever heard of looking at the big picture?"

"I guess. Why?"

"Because you're not doing it."

Darrell didn't say another word. He gripped the steering wheel with both hands, stared straight ahead, and pressed down on the accelerator.

"Slow it down."

With a huff, Darrell brought the minivan down to sixty. A moment later they reached the top of the mountain and began their descent.

Darrell couldn't let it go. "We'd already be there if we hadn't stopped for gas and could've gone a little faster."

Matt struggled to remain calm. He couldn't risk drawing Darrell into a shouting match when the hothead was driving. He carefully controlled his voice and said, "Maybe you just don't understand certain things. We can't get pulled over. If I'm found in Cali, I'm screwed."

"You got that ID."

"I don't know if it'll fly and I'm not risking ten years to find out."

"We're not getting pulled over and if we do, I'll flash my badge."

Matt tried not to laugh. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I'm an officer."

"You're a security guard."

"I'm a security officer. I can arrest people just like cops do."

Matt shook his head. "Look, it's cool you got your concealed permit, but your badge won't get us out of a ticket, and I don't want anyone searching the car. And as far as the gas mileage goes, you have to be joking. You're worried about spending an extra twenty bucks."

"Probably more like forty. We're down to a half tank."

"So? You're making fifteen hundred for an eight-hour trip. You need to let it go," Matt said, turning away before he said something he'd regret.

The thunderstorm was getting worse, the rain coming down with a fury that cloaked the dark desert. Being stuck in the van with Darrell sucked, but at least he was warm and dry.

"When do you think I can go by myself and start making some real money?"

"Real money? It takes you three weeks of playing rent-a-cop to make fifteen hundred."

"You know what I mean."

"Trust me. I want you to start making the trip alone as soon as possible. I really don't wanna get popped for violating. But first a couple things need to happen. Figure on coming out with me at least three more times before Jimmy trusts you. So maybe next month. February at the latest."

"What else?"

"Prove to me that you can chill on these trips. I'd be putting my ass on the line by having you make the run yourself. We're talking major money here."

"I can chill. I'm chillin'."

"No speeding. No reckless driving. No stopping anywhere but for gas. No unnecessary calls."

"Yeah, that's no problem. I drive..." Darrell cut himself off and looked out Matt's window, craning his neck as his eyes followed something disappearing along the side of the road.

"Keep your eyes on the road. What was that all about?"

"Didn't you see that car back there?" Darrell asked, checking the rearview mirror. "They're screwed."

Matt looked out the back, unable to see through the veil of darkness. "There's nothing out there."

"It was a car."

Matt sat back in his chair. "Even if it was, what's the big deal? If they don't have a cell, I'm sure the cops will be by and call a tow truck for them."

"They better hurry. That's not the place to break down."

"Accidents? Robberies?"

Darrell shook his head. "You never heard about this area?"

"No."

"You wouldn't believe the number of people that get killed out here."

"Why haven't I read about it?"

"You're from Vegas. You guys don't care about the crazy stuff that happens out here."

"I'm sure I would have heard about it if people were getting killed. How many you talking about?"

"Hell, I'd say at least fifty that I know of, and that was while I was living in Baker. I haven't been there for five years."

"You want me to believe fifty people died out here?"

"They listed them all as missing, but they're dead. Trust me," Darrell said, peering out Matt's window as if he could see something out there. Matt caught himself looking, too, but the impenetrable darkness still surrounded them.

"So what do they think happened? I bet it was just people leaving the city and never coming back. If I lived in Baker, I'd vanish the second I was old enough to drive."

"Yeah, but would you leave your car on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere? Would your bones be found weeks later, picked clean, not a scrap of meat left on them?"

"You sure you haven't been sampling the merchandise? Maybe reading too much *National Inquirer*?"

"I'm telling you the truth. There's something out there."

"Get real, Darrell," Matt said just before his cell phone vibrated. "Hello?"

"Matt?"

"What's up, Jimmy?"

"I've been trying to get hold of you for the last twenty minutes. Where the hell you at?"

"We passed Baker about fifteen, twenty minutes ago. We should... hey, Jimmy, Jimmy, you there?" Matt took a look at the cell's screen and flipped it shut. "First thing tomorrow I'm changing service. So anyway, what were you saying about all the disappearances? You think it's aliens? Chupacabra?"

"It's not funny, man. People die out there."

<sup>&</sup>quot;They found some bones and the rest just vanished."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Some bones? Vanished? I thought you said fifty died. It sounds more like missing."

Matt opened up the glovebox, pulled out the registration, and read off the number.

Jimmy yelled, "Pull over right now! Pull over!"

"What are you talking about? We're in the middle of nowhere and it's pouring like crazy."

"Pull over!"

"You're breaking up. I'll pull over at the rest stop. There's one up ahead a few miles. I saw a sign."

"No! You've been made..."

The signal faded, leaving Matt with a dead line.

"What was that all about?" Darrell asked.

"Jimmy wants us to pull over. I think he said we were made."

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'm sure they do. Hold on, it's Jimmy again." Matt flipped open the phone.

<sup>&</sup>quot;What's up, Jimmy? You sound worried."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Where you at? Did you hit the state line yet?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;No, we're still about sixty miles from Vegas, about thirty to the border."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Damn! What kind of van you in?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;I don't know, looks like a Dodge. Yeah, it's a Dodge."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Dodge what?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hey, Darrell, what is this thing?" Matt asked. "What model?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Caravan."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hear that? A Caravan."

<sup>&</sup>quot;What's the license plate number?"

"That idiot Paul got popped about an hour after you left. Vice swarmed the house and they knew what they were looking for. The only thing they found was the money but Paul must've sold you out. Paul's girl told me about the bust, so I started monitoring police radio. They've got an APB out on the van. Ditch the cargo."

"Tell me you're joking," Matt said, glancing over his shoulder, fearing he'd see flashing lights coming up behind them.

"I wish. You gotta ditch that stuff. Find somewhere safe, go on to Vegas. Get another set of wheels and pick it up in a couple days."

"Where? Where am I going to stash it? I'm in the middle of the goddamned desert."

"Somewhere someone else ain't gonna stumble onto it. That's a lot of stuff you got on you."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Are you kidding me? We can't pull over."

<sup>&</sup>quot;He said--"

<sup>&</sup>quot;You said, you thought he said we were made. Maybe he was saying something else."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Like what? He wanted us to pull over."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Call him back."

<sup>&</sup>quot;This is him right now. Pull over while I got reception. I don't wanna lose him."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Are you serious?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Just pull over," Matt demanded before opening the phone. "What's up, Jimmy? You hear me?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Pull over, Matt! You've been made."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You sure? How you know?"

"I'm aware of that," Matt said, checking the side window, looking out into the sea of darkness, wishing he could see more than a few feet away. "But I can't go on to Vegas either. If they're looking for the van, they'll nab us before we hit the state line. I'm not going back to prison."

"That's on you, dog. Just don't do anything stupid. If you need to, you can crash at my pad and hide out a few days."

"Thanks, bro. And thanks for the heads up. I'll find a place for this stuff and get back to you."

"So what's up?" Darrell asked.

Matt stuffed the cell into his pocket and turned toward Darrell.

"We need to dump the cargo. Cops are looking for the van."

"We can't dump it."

"We have to. You know how much time we'll do for this?"

"They won't catch us, plus it's my first offense. They'll let me go."

"You believe that? We have two hundred pounds of chronic. That's serious trafficking. If we get stopped we're both screwed."

Darrell shifted to park and took his foot off the brake. "So what do we do? Where do we stash it?"

"Out there," Matt said, thumbing toward his window.

"No way, man. That ain't happening. How about the rest stop?"

"Too many people. Look at the line of cars."

"We could find somewhere to ditch it where no one could find it."

"Two suitcases? I don't think so." Matt peered through the window to get a better look at the congested rest stop two miles downhill. "Ah, Jesus," he moaned. "All

those cars are down there because of the cops. They're detouring them through the stop. You can see their lights."

"Think they're looking for us?"

"It sure as hell isn't a coincidence. Let's get the weed out of here before some pig rolls by and spots us."

"I can't go out there."

Matt shook his head in disgust.

"Not out there, man. There're things out there."

"Bullshit. Even if there were, I guarantee you there are worse things in prison. I know plenty of guys that would kill for a cellie like you. With a dark room and a good imagination, the biggest homophobe would play with those manboobs of yours."

Darrell closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let it out. When he opened his eyes, he pulled his Glock 33 from his waistband where he kept it concealed under his bulging belly.

Matt shook his head at Darrell, reached over, and pulled the keys out of the ignition. "You ready? Put on your hood."

Darrell leaped from the van without a word. Matt met him underneath the canopy of the open rear door.

"Are we going to bury them?" Darrell asked.

"With what? I didn't pack a shovel."

"So where do we put them?"

"Those hills," Matt said, pointing toward a shadowy range running parallel with the road. "There's got to be some rocks where we can hide them."

Darrell stared through the rain. "You have any idea how far that is? No way."

Matt dragged the first suitcase out of the car, surprised by how heavy it was, and then raised the wheel well cover. Before Darrell noticed, he grabbed his hidden .38 Special and stuffed it into his coat pocket. "Then we need to hurry. I'm not going back to prison," he vowed as he crossed the muddy stretch of road that bordered the highway.

Darrell was cursing up a storm, but Matt heard the second suitcase hit the pavement and the rear door slam shut. The complaining didn't last long. Dragging one hundred pounds through the treacherous terrain and torrential downpour was difficult. Neither of them could afford to waste breath talking.

Halfway to the hills, Matt had to set his suitcase down. Pretending it wasn't due to the burning sensation in his arms and lungs, he turned to check on his partner. He could hear Darrell's grunts over the slapping of the rain on the hard desert floor, but couldn't see him. A loud hiss sliced through the air. Matt whirled around and backed up looking for the serpent, his hand on the .38's grip.

He couldn't see a thing in the darkness, but the hiss sliced through the deluge. When Darrell entered the clearing a few seconds later, the hissing stopped.

Darrell dropped his suitcase onto its side. He was breathing so hard, Matt feared his overweight partner would have a heart attack. "Goddamn, this is heavy. How much further?" he asked between gasps, looking past Matt toward the hills.

"We still got a way to go. I'm tired too, but we need to keep moving. If we don't get back to the van before some pig spots it, we're done."

"What?" Matt asked, stepping onto a rock and trying to peer over the small hill that blocked their view of the highway.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hundred yards or so. We can get there in a minute. Come on."

<sup>&</sup>quot;No way. That's at least three hundred. We'll be soaked."

<sup>&</sup>quot;You didn't see?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;They're all over it. Three cars."

Matt scrambled up the rocky hill, the sight of the flashing lights making him nauseous.

When Matt came down, Darrell asked, "Now what? Try to make it to the rest stop and jack a car? That's the only thing I can think of."

"They're going to be crawling all over it. They know we're close. There's nowhere else to go."

"So what? What the hell do we do?"

"First off, we hide the suitcases. We can't get caught with this. If they can't find the drugs, they can't bust us for them. They'll still bust me for violating, but that's better than the alternative." Matt tried in vain to control his shivering. "Let's move before they get a helicopter out here. They'll know we're on this side of the highway."

"Maybe they'll think someone picked us up."

"Hope so, but can't count on it. Let's go. And watch where you're stepping. Snakes are out," Matt said as he returned to the suitcase and began dragging it toward the hills.

"Nah. They're not out now."

"I know what I heard," Matt snapped as the burning sensation returned to his shoulders.

"Impossible. They hibernate in winter. Must've been something else."

In no mood to argue, Matt pushed forward, leaving Darrell behind. Soaked and exhausted, Matt stopped after a couple hundred yards. The rain was letting up, but that was the only thing in their favor. The police chopper had arrived with its searchlight scanning around the highway. And the mountains, which he had thought were hills, were still a few hundred yards away.

Matt sat on the suitcase, holding his head in both hands. He'd rest while Darrell caught up and then they'd make one last run for the mountains. They could make

it. They had to make it. The hiss of light rain rustled the bushes, but he didn't feel rain hitting him anymore. He looked around. The rain had stopped; the hiss had not. It sounded as if it were coming from either side of him and it was getting louder.

Matt got to his feet and pulled out his piece. He wasn't scared of snakes but he refused to get bitten by something poisonous and die lying on top of a hundred pounds of weed.

The clouds slid aside and let the moon shine through. Even with its light, Matt couldn't see much. Sand, brush, rocks, cacti, and more sand. No snakes.

It took Darrell three minutes to catch up. When he entered the clearing, his face was drenched, only this time from sweat, not rain. Once again the hissing stopped.

"The chopper's out," Matt said with a flat voice.

Darrell dropped the suitcase onto the damp sand and bent over, hands resting on his knees. "I saw."

"This hill won't hide us much longer."

Darrell stood panting, trying to recover.

"We need to keep moving," Matt urged.

Darrell raised his arms over his head, something he must have seen an athlete do on TV, only Matt doubted the athlete's belly had heaved with each breath.

"Come on, Darrell, that's long enough. Let's hit the mountains."

"I'm too tired."

"I'll leave you."

"Go ahead." Darrell sat on a rock. He didn't look that tired. "I can't move."

"I'll leave you out here in the dark with the cops, and the snakes, and whatever little boogie monster you think is out here."

"I didn't hear you bitching when I asked you before. You weren't complaining about making some cash." Matt picked up the suitcase, hoping it would be easier to carry than it was to drag.

In the ten minutes it took to make it to the base of the mountain, the helicopter hadn't advanced much. It was too early to get his hopes up but it looked as if he might make it out of this thing a free man. Darrell might not, but that was his own fault. If the fat bastard had taken care of himself, he wouldn't be on the verge of passing out as he tried to keep up.

"Now what?"

"We hide the suitcases. In there," Matt told him, pointing to the small cave twenty yards uphill.

Without a word, Darrell began the ascent. Matt nearly ran into him when Darrell came to an abrupt stop right outside the opening.

"What the hell's the matter? Get in there," Matt ordered.

Darrell whispered, "It's dark."

"No shit, Sherlock," Matt said as he shouldered past him.

"What? What could be out here? Mountain lion? Get out your gun and watch your step."

"It sounded like some kind of hissing."

<sup>&</sup>quot;There ain't no snakes. I told you."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Well, there's something out here hissing and I'm leaving you with it. Are you coming?"

<sup>&</sup>quot;Hold on, goddamnit. I never shoulda came."

<sup>&</sup>quot;And I think I heard something," Darrell added.

Matt took a few steps past the entrance and turned around. "Will you shut up about the hissing?"

"Well, they shouldn't be out."

Matt heard a low hiss, but pretended he hadn't. He walked out of the cave and set his suitcase down, making sure he had Darrell's full attention before speaking. "Know what? I'm pretty tired of your bullshit."

Darrell tried to protest, but Matt held up his hand. "You want to make money, you want more responsibility, you want to do the runs yourself. Why should I let you? You're afraid of the dark. You're afraid of snakes. What else are you afraid of, Darrell?"

"Screw you."

"Earn your keep. If you want to do another run, you do what I say. No questions."

Darrell waited.

"Put the suitcases in there," Matt said, motioning toward the cave. "As far back as you can. I don't want anyone finding them."

"You're serious?"

"If you want your cut."

"Why don't we each take one?"

"Because one of us should stay out here and keep an eye on that helicopter and I don't think either one of us thought to bring a flashlight. Did you?"

"No."

"Well, it looks pretty dark in there. If we both go in, we could get lost."

"What about me?"

"If you can't find your way out, call for me and follow my voice. Come on, we don't have all night."

Darrell huffed and puffed, but did as Matt ordered and picked up his suitcase. "I can't carry both of them," he said.

"Make two trips."

Darrell disappeared in the cave's darkness. Matt sat on his suitcase and watched as the police helicopter circled the desert a few hundred yards away. After several minutes passed, he began to wonder if Darrell decided to take a break.

Matt took one step into the cave. "Darrell, hurry up. The helicopter's getting closer."

There was no response so he cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, "Darrell, can you hear me?"

Again no answer. Matt picked up his suitcase and headed down the dark tunnel, using his free hand to feel the wall alongside him. After a few seconds, he sensed the tunnel widening into a room. He called Darrell's name once more, but the result was the same.

A prolonged hiss echoed through the cave. Very slowly, Matt set the suitcase down and pulled the gun out of his coat. When he turned in a circle to pinpoint the noise, he looked out the tunnel and noticed the helicopter's searchlight was closer.

No longer caring where Darrell was, Matt picked up his suitcase and headed for the closest wall. Prison had ingrained in him the golden rule of looking out for number one. Darrell would either make it or he wouldn't.

Matt tripped over a rock and slammed face first onto the cave's hard floor. Ignoring his bleeding chin and scraped hand, Matt leaped off the floor before a snake could strike. The hissing had grown louder and was coming from more than one spot. Matt reached for his pistol, but it wasn't there. He sank to his knees and

felt the floor. When his hand struck plastic, he realized he'd tripped over Darrell's suitcase.

"What the hell's wrong with you? I could've knocked myself out."

Darrell didn't answer, but even if he had, Matt wasn't sure if he would have heard him over the growing din. The hissing sounded as if it were coming from the tunnel's entrance. And from behind. And to his right. And then to his left as well. He prayed it was the cave's echoes, but it sounded as if he were surrounded.

Matt reached for Darrell's suitcase and felt Darrell's arm draped over it. He squeezed Darrell's hand. "Get up, man."

He shook the arm harder and almost retched when it pulled away from the suitcase and fell onto his lap. The arm had been severed at the elbow. Matt couldn't feel Darrell's body anywhere.

Matt threw the arm into the darkness and heard a grunt as it bounced off something. He scrambled on all fours toward the entrance. The searchlight illuminated the outline of a massive, multi-armed creature filling the cave's mouth.

Matt spun in a circle, hoping to see another exit, disappointed by pure darkness. He turned back to the entrance. Brief flashes of searchlight revealed more of the creatures plodding toward him. Matt took a step backward and bumped into a wet jellylike wall of a chest.

A pulsating arm wrapped around his neck, cutting off his scream. Deafened by the hissing, unable to move, he stared straight ahead. The entrance was gone. He couldn't see outside, but he knew that the cops were out there. Another ten years locked in a nine-by-nine cell with asshole guards on him twenty-four hours a day was out there. A decade of fighting and fearing, waiting and wishing was out there. God, what he wouldn't have given to be out there.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Michael Van Ornum is a Pharmacist and Nurse living in upstate New York with his wife and three children. His other published work includes professional articles and poetry.

"Blood Brothers" represents his first published fiction.

#### **Blood Brothers**

by Michael Van Ornum

Second Lieutenant Charlemagne 'Charlie' Brown banged his knee on the humvee's dash, adding pain to his frustration as he watched the dust cloud hide Tiamo Abd al Jabbar's stryker brigade escort. "Catch him," he ordered Private First Class Caroll. The humvee surged forward.

Don't tell *me* you have new orders, Charlie thought. We have orders: ensure the road to Khandahar is clear. You just want to avenge your wounded pride on an innocent girl. And for what? Because she had the guts to stand up to you? He imagined himself an avenging angel swooping down on the runaway Afghani officer. It helped appease his guilt for encouraging the girl to be more independent.

Charlie swore. Should've checked the job assignments at the base before we left, he thought. Afghani soldiers—even those in military police—had a way of disappearing whenever Tiamo did something illegal. What justice allowed a man

<sup>&</sup>quot;Any radio contact?" he yelled over the rushing wind.

<sup>&</sup>quot;None sir," a soldier behind him said. "Unable to confirm Tiamo's orders."

like Tiamo to rape his own country? The dust trail left the main road, leaving Charlie with an unpleasant decision. Intel said the road to Khandahar was clear but the side roads...well, increased Taliban activity made anything off the cleared route suspect.

"He be back," an Afghani soldier said. "We do what we told. Everything all right."

"No, it's not 'all right'," snapped Charlie. He directed PFC Caroll to pursue.

I'd be twice damned, he thought, once for encouraging the girl and then for doing nothing to protect her. The fist of guilt and injustice hammered at Charlie; his knee throbbed with pain.

He turned to the Afghani and unloaded. "Do you have any idea we're here, why Americans are here?"

The Afghani shook his head and moved a little closer to the door, away from Charlie's passion.

"Freedom, that's what. Operation Enduring *Freedom*. Something your five buddies ahead don't get. And if they've done anything, *anything* to violate—"

That girl.

"-that freedom..."

\*

The memory faded. Charlie shook his head and his office came into focus around him—no Afghan mountains, no dusty roads, just a small room with the gold-embossed "Colonel Charlemagne Brown: Director of CID Agent Training" title glinting from his door. Twenty-five years ago and it still felt like yesterday. The military's CID training facility at Fort Leonard Wood was a long way from Afghanistan. The portrait of his brother in an Army private's uniform, marred by a white circle in the center, stared at him from the rear wall. A strong chin, arching brow, and confident gaze mirrored Charlie's features from two dozen years ago. Time had since begun tinting his dark brown hair with streaks of gray, plowing

light furrows through his forehead and planting small, dark spots on his face and hands as a promise of things to come.

His secretary's image appeared on a holographic screen and demanded his attention.

"Sir? A Chief Jacob Ladonna is here for you. Should I send him in?"

"Give me five minutes. Thank you." Charlie tapped the screen closed and accessed the graduate's profile for review.

Chief Ladonna looked promising: top grades in his class and student leadership positions. Charlie accessed the Chief's social history: only child, father unknown. Mother worked as a civilian cook on the base—he'd seen her many times, watched the boy grow into a man, for that matter. Career goals? Aspirations to work in Secret Service—that could work to his advantage.

A polite knock on his door announced the man behind the profile. Chief Jacob Ladonna had the wiry strength of a marathon runner with a shock of unruly black hair, piercing gray eyes, and a posture that challenged the world around him. He saluted. "Chief Ladonna reporting as ordered, sir."

"At ease," Charlie said, motioning him into a stuffed leather chair opposite his desk. "You're a CID Agent, Chief. Why are you taking this externship instead of an assignment?"

The Chief shifted in his chair. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Sir? I'm ...not sure what you want. Your lectures on ethics, justice, morality..." He looked at the ceiling, the floor, then leaned back in resignation. "...they inspired me and I want to learn more. From you."

"To learn more." Charlie closed the holographic screen. "My father named my brother and me after Emperors Valentine and Charlemagne. It's a sad truth that human morals and ethics have advanced little since their time." Charlie strode over to a display case filled with a collection of knives from medieval to modern. "Your challenge is to rise above the inertia, to be the eyes of our blind lady of justice. And yet...what balances a life on her scales?" He withdrew a short blade

with the barest hint of a curve. "This blade is used for seppuku, the honorable way for a samurai warrior to end his own life. Yet the same blade that preserves honor can be used for murder. One act restores balance, the other destroys it. The best agents don't investigate crimes, they investigate people." Charlie returned the knife to the case and jabbed his own chest with his fingers as if testing steel.

"What you need is in here. It's not learned, it's earned. It's not taught, it's sought. To seek and understand the true nature of Justice, that's why *you* are here." Charlie strode to his chair behind the desk.

"Your assignment is to give me a full report on the reason Army stryker brigade 72 failed to reach Khandahar twenty-five years ago—11 August 2003."

Chief Ladonna's gaze fell.

"This is more than a research assignment, Chief. This case has personal meaning for me. Give me your report in three days. If you have the case solved by then, you'll have my personal recommendation to the Secret Service and more. Dismissed."

Chief Ladonna stood and saluted. "Yes sir."

And so it is done, Charlie thought. There's no turning back.

Charlie left not long after the Chief did and, as always, paused before the portrait of his brother. He touched his lips, then the picture's center, where only canvas showed through. "Perhaps this is the one that brings an end," he said softly.

\*

The Secret Service—and with the Colonel's recommendation! Pride made Jacob run all the way to the computer lab in Thurman Hall.

Well into the night, he signed off the network with gigabytes of information stored in his palm-top. What more was there to know? he asked himself. The stryker brigade hit an improvised explosive device—an IED—and blew up. Finding clues would be so much easier with Red Dragon, the laptop he'd once customized with illegal components designed for hacking. But he couldn't afford to go there. A CID

Agent stood for truth and justice: Assist, Protect, Defend. Jacob shook his head. Just be glad you never got caught, he told himself.

Jacob pulled out his palm-top and called up the personnel file of one of the victims: Valentine Brown. He recognized the picture, of course – it was the same picture that hung in the Colonel's office. Dredging up the past must be painful. Why would the Colonel want *this* investigation opened?

The details of the case swirled about his head as he drove to his apartment. The signature on the Commanding Officer's report, or CO-report, said C. Brown—could that be the same man as the Colonel? If he was there, why investigate the case at all? And why were the autopsy reports of the victims so similar: All five men dead from an arterial bleed? What was in that IED, shrapnel with guidance systems? No, the Colonel wanted him to find something.

Thoughts of the case plagued his dreams that night, growing into a continuous loop of a stryker brigade's humvee running over the IED. Metal twisted and tore with a shrill, screeching ring.

Jacob's eyes flew open. The phone in the kitchen gave another ring before voicemail kicked on. He rolled over and checked the time—four a.m.? His palmtop buzzed, chattering on the surface of the night-stand. Jacob frowned. Only urgent messages got transferred to the palmtop. The darkness sat heavy and still as he felt in the direction of the palmtop's blinking green light and activated the holographic screen.

A voice altered into a hollow, mechanical sound, filled the room; the blank screen cast a green glow across his bed. "Dig in the past and whatever floats up stinks of death. Keep your hands clean. Drop the case."

Jacob's mind raced as he used the palmtop to search the Fort's communications server. The caller's ID had to be there somewhere. Screen after screen gave him the same answer: Nothing. The server had shut down at four a.m. for scheduled maintenance. Jacob closed the palmtop in disgust. Only the Colonel knew what he was working on...unless the files were tagged. Why would someone watch files

decades old? For a moment, Jacob glimpsed something in the case that was dark and hidden, and then it was gone.

\*

Charlie gripped the door's armrest as the humvee bounced along a road designed more for goats than vehicles. Great boulders sat like hungry teeth in the sloping ground below.

"Ware Taliban, nine o'clock," PFC Caroll called. A man with a gun ducked out of sight behind a rock—Taliban until proven otherwise.

Charlie ordered a halt. "Radio contact?"

"Nothing."

Charlie squeezed the armrest harder. "Now we have to wait for our escort to return," he said. He ordered the humvee into the shadow of a large scrub brush. At least Tiamo won't see us until it's too late, he thought. And heaven help you if you've done anything to that girl.

In his heart, he knew this wasn't about the Afghani girl. Yes, he'd encouraged her to be independent, to experience what freedom meant. When rumors said she fended off Tiamo's desires with a knee to his groin, Charlie was proud. This is what we came here for, he thought, this is what the country needs.

No, this was bigger than the girl. Tiamo was trying to extinguish the spark of freedom that Charlie, his brother, and the rest of the army were risking their lives for. It was about protecting that freedom. It was about bringing evil to justice. Purging his guilt was a side-benefit.

\*

Chief Ladonna's knock brought Charlie out of his memories and back into his office.

"Chief, have a seat. Find anything?" Of course he had; Charlie could see it in the Chief's eyes.

"Thank you, sir," said Chief Ladonna, "but I won't be long."

Charlie nodded.

The Chief asked, "Sir. What is your role in this investigation?"

Good, Charlie thought, the difference between real life and classrooms was sinking in. "What did you find?"

"Your brother was killed in that incident, sir."

"Yes. War is unfortunate," said Charlie, his voice taking a hard edge. Discussing his brother's death never got easier. Never.

"And yet you assign the case to a rookie agent. Why? Sir."

The challenge caught Charlie unprepared; no one had ever challenged him about the case before. "If the case is too difficult, I'll find another extern."

"You use your brother's death as a training exercise? With all due respect, I thought you a man of principles, sir."

Charlie rose from his chair with old pain and anger pouring through fresh wounds. "Val is NOT a training exercise. He's closer to me than anyone living and I'll have you stripped of rank before hearing you speak of him like that again. Is...that...clear?"

Chief Ladonna met his gaze. "Your name is on the CO-report, you were there. What can I tell you that you don't already know?" He opened the door to leave. "There is no case. There is no externship. Sir."

Val's portrait stared down at Charlie, accusing him of failure, taunting him, echoing Charlie's thoughts and fears. His mind churned. Not another year, I can't do this for another year.

"Wait!" Charlie called. "Just...wait." He steadied himself with a deep breath. "Val was murdered," he admitted. Saying those words was like giving up a piece of his soul.

Chief Ladonna's hand fell from the door in surprise.

"I *honor* his memory with this externship in the hopes that his killer may be brought to justice," Charlie said.

The Chief bowed his head. "I'm sorry, sir. If you'll lift the locks on my account I'll get back to work."

"Locks?"

Chief Ladonna told him about the early morning phone call. "...and when I came in, I discovered the files had tracers on them. My account is locked down. That wasn't you?"

Charlie shook his head. "They'll be lifted by tomorrow."

"In Afghanistan—can you tell me your side of what happened?"

"Nothing that isn't already in the CO-report," Charlie said, settling behind the safety of his desk once more. "Dismissed."

\*

Without network access, Jacob passed the time reviewing what files he had and reflecting on his confrontation with the Colonel: It was a bitter-sweet victory. Though he'd confirmed the Colonel was present at the incident, the man's personal agenda remained hidden. And somewhere in the exchange, Jacob had lost self-respect. How could I goad him like that? he wondered. It was like a blister on his foot after half a march.

Before lunch the next day, his palmtop buzzed with a call from his mother.

"Got time for a personal assignment?" she asked.

"What's going on?"

"I got canned, that's what. Boss goes on vacation and someone I never seen before comes along and gives me the pink slip. Said he was keeping the muck from floating up or some-such nonsense."

Jacob stiffened. "Who said this, Ma?" he asked, sharper than intended.

"Don't know-wait...last name was Caroll, I think."

The name sounded familiar. "Hang on a sec." Jacob swapped the call for the CO-report on his palmtop. PFC Caroll was listed as a team member—another coincidence? Jacob accessed the Fort's civilian personnel biographies: Thomas Caroll's enlistment ended fifteen years ago. He now worked at the Fort as a manager in the information technology department.

"I'm back, Ma. Just wait all right? I can fix this." He closed the call and jammed the palmtop into its case on his belt. His mother! What was so important about this investigation? He walked quickly through the halls pausing only to read a directory that gave him directions to Caroll's office.

Thomas Caroll sat eating at his desk when Jacob burst in. Caroll's neat uniform and shaved head contrasted with the jumble of his office yet spoke of a purposeful deliberateness designed to create a particular impression. Like the phone call. Like Jacob's locked accounts. Like his mother's job.

"What do you want?" Jacob demanded.

Caroll looked at Jacob, then his sandwich. "Mustard would be nice."

Jacob shut the door. "You know what I mean."

Caroll dusted bread crumbs from his shirt. "In that, you are absolutely correct." He opened a public call with the holographic console on his desk.

"Mrs. Ladonna? This is Thomas Caroll. I'm so very sorry to have caused such an inconvenience today. Your job is reinstated; you can report to work as usual tomorrow. I apologize for the abominable misunderstanding. The error is entirely mine."

"Misunderstanding? Well I—"

"Thank you Mrs. Ladonna." Caroll closed the call and turned back to Jacob. "I wondered what it would take to get you here. Frankly, I'm surprised a man with your training took so long." He strode to the door, stepping carefully over stray computer parts, wires, and chipsets on the floor. "Let's talk. Outside."

\*

The sun dropped into the mountains of Afghanistan before Charlie spotted a tell-tale dust cloud rising up to stain the golden globe. Minutes later, Tiamo's vehicle roared past; Charlie sent the humvee surging after their escort. He felt grim satisfaction at the surprised expressions on the faces of the soldiers visible in the rear of the escort – soldiers and a motionless body wrapped in blankets. The girl! Rage and guilt mixed together, fueling an explosive fury that burned white-hot.

"Taliban!" called PFC Caroll, slowing the humvee.

Tiamo's escort dwindled into a dust cloud once more. The road to Khandahar loomed like a forlorn finish line. The dust cloud turned onto the main road, then changed into a roiling mass of flame and ash as the first IED exploded. Two more explosions transformed the road ahead into a hail of stone and dirt. The Taliban had circled around to mine the road behind them! A jeep appeared from the east, lightly armed, and approached Tiamo's wrecked escort. Charlie barked out orders; PFC Caroll pulled hard on the wheel and cut off its line of approach. At the sight of a fully armored humvee, the Taliban jeep swerved and disappeared behind the cover of a black smoke plume. Soldiers in the rear of the humvee lay down a withering fire and the jeep made a hasty retreat.

PFC Caroll skidded to a halt a hundred yards from the smoking wreck of Tiamo's vehicle.

"Keep 'em off my back," Charlie called, running for the wreck. "Secure the area. I'll check for survivors and radio if I need you." With a deep breath, he plunged through the oily smoke.

"Got it," PFC Caroll said.

\*

Thomas Caroll squinted at the gathering clouds in the Missouri sky. "The body that was wrapped up in that humvee? It wasn't the Afghani girl we thought it would be...it was Val, the Colonel's brother. The poor guy had leave cancelled and was transferred to Tiamo's escort by the Major—probably to keep an eye on Tiamo. Charlie lost it. He swore he wouldn't rest until his brother's murderer saw justice." Caroll tapped Jacob firmly on his chest. "That's what this assignment is, to satisfy his delusion."

"Tiamo died according to the CO-report," Jacob protested. "He must know that."

"You believe the CO-report? I *wrote* the CO-report and gave it to Charlie to sign. Truth is, Tiamo's body was never found. Taliban jeep probably took him. I *know* I dropped one of them, and the Afghani don't keep dental records. You want to know where Tiamo is? Take a good look at the current trade advisor to the President of Afghanistan." The rain fell in spats but Caroll stood firm. "Now you listen good, Chief. The Colonel's a fine soldier, a great man, and a good friend. If he..." His voice dropped lower, "If he finds out Tiamo's still alive, no force on Earth'll keep him here. He'll destroy his career. He does this every year, and every year I have to save him. Now there's the right thing to do and there's the best thing." He gripped Jacob's shoulder hard. "Do what's best, Chief."

Caroll returned to his office without a backward glance. Jacob shivered. Yeah, he know what to do. Give the same line as every other agent. Keep the peace. But what about the Colonel's peace? These charades had to end.

Jacob returned to his apartment, reminding himself that he'd sworn never to use Red Dragon again even as he opened the storage closet next to his bed. Red Dragon was more than just a laptop, it was a part of himself he'd fought to escape. There had to be another way—a legal way, Jacob told himself. He almost shut the closet, but something the Colonel had said stopped him. "The blade used for murder can restore balance." Would restoring the Colonel's peace be worth losing his security rating, if not his career? Jacob pulled a netswitcher and Red Dragon out of the jumble of electronic parts piled on his closet floor. For the Colonel, he thought as he wiped off a film of dust, almost reverently, from the laptop's cover.

He booted up without a problem. Using his military account as a trojan horse, Jacob bypassed traces, tags, and the lighter security codes. It helped that none of the information he sought was particularly sensitive. When he was through with the military network, he logged out and jumped into the Afghani government's files. His resolve kept him going through the night, pushing him until the sun sent shafts of red light to pierce the windows of his room and bleed across the bed. He squinted into the light and closed the laptop.

Today is the day, he thought. Can I do this? The Red Dragon had come through once again but the cost...Jacob wanted to turn back time and take Caroll's path. The scales of Justice required much to balance the sins of the past. Jacob leaned back and shut his eyes. He imagined himself in the Secret Service, since that was as close as he would ever get. He would lose his career if he ever explained how he got the information. At least he knew the truth, the cold, hard truth. The Colonel's secret had to stay hidden.

Exhaustion wrestled Jacob to the bed. He set his alarm for five hours and crawled under the covers.

\*

Charlie closed the holographic screen. The Chief didn't log into any base facilities this morning, and that disturbed him. The files he had monitored over the past few days carried new access dates; someone viewed them last night and covered their tracks well. Jacob must have found something.

Charlie opened the holographic screen again, accessed the military's GPS, and searched for Jacob Ladonna. A map appeared with glowing crosshairs over the location of the Chief's ID badge. Charlie patched the coordinates over to an electric transport cart and left his office. The cart's internal computer guided him silently down Demolition Avenue to find a disheveled figure standing at the edge of the dam on Big Piney River.

"Chief!" he called out. "Where's my report?"

The Chief didn't answer but spared a brief glance over his shoulder as Charlie made his way to the dam's edge. Charlie was distracted by the water for a moment,

so still at the top of the dam yet so violent below—like the Chief's eyes right now. He could tell the Chief knew the truth. He'd seen the same haunted look in the mirror too many times.

"I've nothing to report," Jacob said.

"Nothing you choose to report."

"Yeah, that's right."

"You passed, you know." Charlie bent over and picked up a rock. "You're the first one I'd feel comfortable recommending to the Secret Service."

Jacob gave a bitter, barking laugh. "Too late. I compromised my security status to get your answers." His shoulder's sagged and his voice fell to a whisper. "I thought I could give you peace, restore the balance." He sniffed and pinched his nose with his fingers. "It was stupid. Sentiment. But you know what happened. I thought you blacked out or something. I tried to give you every excuse..."

Charlie nodded and reached out.

Jacob yanked his arm away and stared at Charlie, his eyes reflecting the dull pain that tinged his voice. "You didn't know your brother was in the brigade; you thought he was going on leave. You didn't know."

\*

Black smoke billowed past. Flames licked up from the burning debris of the humvee, blown in half by the IED. Charlie focused on the five soldiers that crewed Tiamo's brigade. Moans of pain mingled with the crack of expanding metal. Soot and flame had blackened the faces of two men beyond recognition. Two more lay pinned beneath the vehicle's frame while the last lay motionless on the ground.

A man with a blackened face gurgled something. Charlie pushed the remains of a seat and steering wheel away to reveal a soldier in Afghan uniform. A luxurious lock of hair with two earrings circled the man's neck. Charlie wanted to vomit. He shaved her? What else did Tiamo do? He didn't want to know. What would Tiamo do tomorrow? Next month? Next year?

He was the avenging angel, his knife drawn without thinking. The man's throat oozed where shrapnel had grazed him. Charlie used his blade to extend the wound into the artery. A soldier cried out behind him. Witnesses! In a panic, Charlie silenced them all in a similar fashion. It's merciful, he told himself. But where was the girl? He went through the soldiers again. All men.

\*

"You couldn't find the girl," Jacob said, bringing Charlie back to the dam in Missouri. "Caroll told me about her."

Charlie stared at the ripples in the water, spreading as the horrific event had done throughout his life. "No," he said, "they left her in the village. Val defended her. Tiamo and his men settled for humiliation and shaved her head. They beat Val unconscious, put him in an Afghan uniform, and made him wear her hair."

"So why do all this? Why have CID Agents investigating your own crime?"

Charlie squeezed the rock in his hand, then let it fall. "You've investigated the crime; did you investigate the man?"

"That's why I'm here, wondering where my life is going," Jacob said, fingering his ID badge as if to toss it into the water. "I put everything I believed in on the line for you. I believed in you."

Charlie reached out and gently closed Jacob's hand over the ID badge. "I took justice into my own hands and paid a terrible price. I spent my life, trying to balance the scales of Justice. Don't make my sin your own, Jacob. You and the other agents were the grains of sand in my hourglass." Charlie held out his hands as if for cuffs. "Take me in, Chief. My time is done."

Jacob shook his head. "I thought a lot about that. You don't owe anything, least of all to me." He turned and started walking up the road to the Fort. "You have your peace. Let me find mine."

\*

The next morning, a call from Caroll interrupted Jacob's packing of his few belongings. Colonel Charlemagne Brown had committed ritual suicide the night before.

"Thanks for letting me know," Jacob said.

"The Colonel left a letter addressed to you."

"I did the best thing."

"You did what you did. Leave it at that." Caroll closed the call.

Jacob picked up the letter from the Colonel's secretary later that day.

Chief Ladonna,

Though my life is over, it paves the way for yours to begin. As promised, I left my recommendation that the Secret Service accept you for training. You will hear from them shortly. You have learned the nature of Justice and the dangers of presumption. Do not throw that away. You are shaken, but not beaten; have suffered blows but not fallen; have severely tested your moral convictions and survived. I can think of no better successor than you and as such, I made you the sole inheritor in my will. As my brother before me, let me be your conscience, your blood brother in the bond we shared. I ask no repayment except that you pursue Justice and Truth in all that you do.

#### Charlie

Jacob read the letter several times. Its words wrapped around him, pulling the events of the past three days into a new focus, and within that focus, a new life. Jacob moved the Red Dragon from the packing box to the trash.

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## HONORABLE MENTION

Cory Cramer currently lives in Ames, Iowa, with his wife, Heather, and a hungry Oscar fish named Hannibal. You can find out more about him and his work, including a self-published serial novel called *Losing Latitude*, at www.corycramer.com.

"Backseat Driver" is his first professional sale.

# **Backseat Driver**

by Cory Cramer

The garage door shouldn't be open, Karen thought as she stepped outside into a frigid Iowa winter. Irritated by her husband Cole's lack of responsibility, she shook her head, figuring the door had been up since he left for work at the prison over five hours ago.

"Might as well not even have a garage," she said while closing her home's side door a little harder than normal, taking some of her frustration out on it before she locked up.

Reluctantly, Karen inhaled the sub-zero air and let out a sigh. Her breath hovered in front of her, just another reminder of how cold the garage was. With chattering teeth, she climbed into her Tahoe and pulled the door shut. She nestled her insulated coffee mug into the cup holder. Steam ascended through the tiny drinking hole, condensed on the inside of the windshield and froze there, leaving a light frost on the underside of the glass.

The engine was slow to turn over, but eventually rumbled to life. The new SUV took longer to warm up than her old Civic, but she loved the Tahoe's four-wheel-

drive on icy commutes like this one. Plus, now she didn't have to listen to Cole refer to her car as a rice-burner or Nagasaki-nut-buster anymore. Nope, now she drove good ole American muscle. Who cared about the extra twenty dollars a week it guzzled in fuel?

Karen flipped on her headlights, then backed into the street, making sure *she* shut the garage door before pulling away. It was three in the morning and she still had a fifty-minute drive to her bakery in Ashtenburg.

The radio was pre-tuned to her favorite station. It was the top of the hour and the overnight disc jockey was reading the news:

Once again, we have just received word that a prisoner has escaped from the Fort Barton penitentiary. The fugitive, thirty-two year old Phillip Conco, was convicted for the murder of his girlfriend in 1998. He is described as a Caucasian with dark brown hair and a small build. Police say he had no known transportation, and no winter clothing. They expect he will be seeking shelter somewhere in the vicinity of Fort Barton. Authorities are asking citizens to be on the lookout for any suspicious activity. Conco is considered armed and dangerous, and should not be confronted. Please call police immediately if you believe you know his whereabouts.

Karen snatched her cell phone from the center console, flipped it open, and hit speed-dial number one. The phone began to ring on the other end. She squeezed the cell between her shoulder and neck, freeing her hand so she could turn off the radio. Ice crunched loudly under the tires as she pulled onto the road to Ashtenburg and increased her speed.

Cole picked up on the sixth ring. "I thought I told you not to call me at work."

"Yeah, well, I heard about the break-out on the radio and I was calling to make sure you were all right. Sorry I cared." Karen flipped her phone shut, then tossed it in the passenger seat.

She slowed down for the intersection at Highway 119, eventually coming to a halt under the amber streetlights of the two-way stop. She checked both ways. The coast was clear. As she accelerated back up to speed, something in the rearview

mirror caught her eye. It was a shadow, cast on the interior ceiling behind the cargo light. It looked like something...fuzzy.

What do I have in the back that could make a shadow like that? She stared for a second longer, but continued to accelerate until the lights at the intersection were too far away to cast the shadow anymore. It had looked like...fur. No, not fur. Hair? Yes, frizzy tufts of human hair! But that's ridiculous. How could someone be back there? Her heart jolted to life as adrenaline turned every inch of her skin clammy. The fucking garage door! Anyone could have climbed back there before I left the house.

Her lungs seized and her hands trembled. She stared into the mirror, searching for movement in the cargo area. Everything seemed still, but the back seats obscured a large portion of her view. She listened for noise. All she heard was the hum of her all-season tires.

Slowly, Karen let out the breath she had been holding in. The tendons in her neck relaxed a bit, and her vice-like grip on the steering wheel eased. A cigarette. She wanted a cigarette, but she'd quit at the first of the year. It was the only resolution she had managed to keep. Without any smokes, she reached for the next best thing—her coffee.

As she was lifting her insulated mug from its holder, a voice blared out an order:

Stop!

She shrieked and dropped her mug.

*In the name of love...* 

The ringtone was earsplitting.

The Tahoe swerved left. Karen slapped both hands back on the wheel and spun it to the right. She overcorrected a bit. The SUV fishtailed in response. She turned back to the left just in time, narrowly escaping a rollover.

Before you break my heart...

The passenger's side tires were now plowing through the snow on the shoulder. Karen eased back onto the road, then snatched her phone up and flipped it open.

"Just hold on a second," she snapped.

With both eyes fixed on the road and one hand on the wheel Karen fished around on the floor for her spilled coffee mug. Her fingers found the handle and she returned it to its holder before grabbing her phone from her lap.

"What is it?"

"Sheesh. No need to yell. I just called to apologize. Thought I'd given you enough time to cool down, but—" Cole said.

"Don't worry about it. I'm just a little jumpy," she said. "I take it you're okay? I heard about the break-out."

"Yeah, I'm fine. None of the guards were hurt, but some of us are going to have hell to pay. They might even try to blame me and Mitch for the whole thing. I was getting a good bitch-out from the boss when you called. That's why I snapped."

"Well, I'm glad to hear you're okay, but you left the garage door up and my truck was freezing so you're still on my shit-list."

Headlights appeared down the road and Karen concentrated a little more on her driving. It was only a two-lane highway and she wanted to make sure to give the oncoming car a wide berth.

"Garage door? I'm pretty sure I put it down," Cole said.

"Well, you didn't. Because when I—" Karen cut herself off.

What if he really is in here? If so, he can hear me. She glanced nervously into the mirror again, only to see the taillights of the car she'd just met heading in the opposite direction.

"It was almost all the way down when I pulled away, but I suppose something could have gotten underneath the door before it hit the bottom and the safety sensor could have stopped it. Maybe a raccoon or something."

If he thinks I'm on to him, who knows what he'll do to me?

"Okay, honey. Sorry I bothered—"

THUMP.

"-you."

Did that come from the back?

Jesus, Karen, get hold of yourself. Probably just ran over a chunk of ice. Haven't even been watching the road.

"It's alright hun. I've got to go though, okay?" Cole said.

"Okay..." Her voice trailed off and she shut her phone, eyes still fixed in the mirror.

No one is back there. You're just imagining things. Let it go and get to work. You have two hundred cinnamon rolls to make this morning.

To her right, Karen could see the light pollution from Fort Barton penitentiary. It was set back a full mile or two from the highway, but it was casting as much light into the night sky as a small town and couldn't be missed from the highway. This morning it was even brighter, no doubt because of the escapee.

Headlights were closing in from behind. The frizzy-haired shadow appeared again.

Shit!

She had to let Cole know what was going on. Maybe she was overreacting, but figuring it was better to be safe than sorry she discreetly opened her phone in her lap. Shielding it from any possible onlooker in the back, she began her text message.

#### I THINK SOMEONE IS—

The car behind her was gaining ground. Karen slowed up slightly. Maybe if there was a witness the guy in back wouldn't make a move. She paused her text message for a few moments, waiting for the approaching car to get closer.

As the vehicle behind her approached, she saw it was a police car. A sheriff's car to be exact.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, Lord.

It almost had to be Barry Henderson, the sheriff. He lived just two houses down from her. He must have gotten called out to look for the murderer. Karen tried to think of some way she could get his attention without the man in her cargo hold noticing.

Maybe if I could get pulled over for something? Yeah. Get pulled over and then as soon as the car stops, jump out before the guy in back has time to take me hostage.

Feeling it was her only option, Karen gently added pressure to the gas pedal, slowly increasing her speed so she would only draw the attention of the sheriff and not her passenger.

Ten miles per hour over; then fifteen...

She held steady, wondering why the lights hadn't started flashing behind her yet. Any time now, she thought. Then, with her eyes still fixed on the mirror, she very discreetly pushed the release button on her safety belt, and let it creep across her body until she was free from its constraint.

Why isn't he pulling me over?

Probably because he isn't looking for speeders, Karen. He's looking for the cold-blooded killer in the back of your truck.

She was going to need a worse offense than speeding to get pulled over. Something horrible. Something that no officer of the law could ignore. Drunk driving. That's it. Perfect time of night for it, too.

Karen veered into the other lane, then gently eased back across the centerline. She watched the mirrors, waiting for the cherries to come to life on top of the squad car any second.

#### Nothing.

Time was running out. The man in the back had to be getting suspicious by now. Desperate, Karen swerved into the other lane again, this time sending all four tires over the centerline. She stayed there, determined not to leave until the sheriff pulled her over.

She looked forward and saw a car with no lights on.

The vehicles hit head-on. Karen flew forward. The airbag deployed, breaking her nose but saving her skull. Her momentum carried her upward. She smashed her head against the roof of the Tahoe. A sharp crack in her neck was the last thing she felt.

The Tahoe flipped and rolled onto its top, busting out the side windows. Karen's lifeless body was tossed from one end of the SUV to the other as if she were no more valuable than her coffee cup.

Her head and torso flopped out the broken passenger side window on the final roll. When the Tahoe came down, it trapped her underneath. The SUV skidded down the icy highway on its side, first crushing, then smearing Karen's remains along a forty yard stretch of road.

\*

In Barry Henderson's fifteen years as sheriff, he'd pulled a lot of dead bodies from the wreckage of automobile accidents. It never got any easier. Especially when it's your neighbor's body you're pulling. Especially when you watched her die.

And that was a cakewalk compared to notifying the relatives. Even worse was when they had to identify the body. Barry wished he could have done the ID himself, and spared Cole the miserable job. It was Karen's Tahoe. Barry knew that.

But the body, and especially the face, was so mangled and distorted he could barely say for sure it was a person, much less a specific person. When it came to stuff like this you had to be *sure*. That meant Cole had to do the job.

Barry had never liked tattoos, but the little dancing bear above Karen's ankle turned out to be a blessing. Not that it spared Cole much grief. When Barry broke the news to him Cole started crying, mumbling to himself that it was all his fault. It wasn't of course, but Cole was admitted to the psych ward at the hospital anyway. He'd likely spend a day or two there before being released, Prozac in hand.

At least it was all over now. Barry was nearly home. He listened to the radio, waiting to hear how badly the reporters had butchered his carefully prepared statement about the accident. Barry knew he'd be upset if they did a poor job, but he secretly wanted to be pissed off at someone and he figured reporters were as good a target as any. The radio finally got around to saying:

At approximately 3:25 this morning, an SUV driven by Mrs. Karen Benedict was traveling east on Highway 21 when it crossed the centerline and collided head-on with a vehicle driven by Philip Conco. Conco had escaped from Fort Barton penitentiary earlier in the morning and was wanted by police. It appears Conco was traveling westbound in a stolen car and did not have his headlights on, when Benedict fell asleep at the wheel and veered into his lane. The drivers of both vehicles were pronounced dead at the scene of the accident.

The sheriff turned off the radio and tried to remember if he still had that bottle of Jack in his liquor cabinet. A few blocks later, he turned into his driveway and wondered why the hell his garage door was up. He pulled the squad car into his garage and hit the button on his new electronic opener.

His door ratcheted closed. Two houses down, at the Benedicts, the garage door began to open.

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