

8 STORIES

Mike Ramon

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Last Cigarette

The car came to a rough stop, the tires sliding in the sand. The engine idled for a moment, and then fell silent. The driver got out of the car and slammed the door shut. He wore a suit, expensive shoes, and polarized sunglasses. He looked around; nothing all around but empty desert. The temperature hovered near a hundred degrees, and the transition from the cool interior of the car to the open heat of the day made beads of sweat pop out on his forehead.

He walked around behind the car and knocked on the lid of the trunk. Desperate muffled sounds were the only response. He popped the trunk open and looked into it, down at his prey. A man lay hogtied in the trunk, a torn piece of cloth wrapped around his head, the front end stuck in his mouth and the back end tied into a knot at the back of his head. He wore a suit also, but cheaper shoes. The man in the sunglasses pulled the other man out of the trunk slowly, dropping him unceremoniously onto the ground. He bent down and untied the strip of cloth.

“God damn, you have no idea how much that hurt,” the bound man said. “You have to stop this. If you untie me now we can forget all about this. Whatever they’re paying you, I’ll double it. I swear.”

The man stood over him, looking down at him pitilessly.

“What’s your name?” the bound man asked.

“Slade.”

“Slade? Is that your first or last name?”

“Does it matter?”

“No, I guess not. Listen Slade, my name is Robert Flanagan, and I—”

“I know who you are.”

“Good. Then you know how much money I have. Or you at least have a rough estimate,” Flanagan said with a strained laugh. “I’ll give you...I’ll give you a million dollars. All you have to do is untie me and drive me back to town. How does that sound?”

Slade bent down again and started untying the rope restraining Flanagan’s arms and legs.

“Oh, thank God,” Flanagan whispered.

Slade finished untying him and tossed the rope into the empty trunk. Flanagan started to get up.

“You won’t regret this,” he said. “I take good care of my friends.”

Slade kicked him in the gut and he sank back to the ground.

“What the hell did you do that for?” Flanagan asked between shallow gasps for air.

“Stay down there until I tell you to get up.”

Slade went to the back door of the car, opened it and reached in. He grabbed a shovel that was lying on the backseat and closed the door again. He walked back to where Flanagan lay on the ground.

“Now you can get up,” he said.

“Wh-what do you need that shovel for?” Flanagan asked.

“Get up or I’ll crack your fucking head open with it.”

Flanagan got warily to his feet, his eyes never leaving the shovel.

“Whatever you’re thinking of doing, you should reconsider.”

“Here’s the deal,” Slade said. “You’re gonna take this shovel and dig a nice big hole. If you refuse or if you stall in any way, I’ll break every damn bone in your body one by one. You will die slowly and painfully. Eventually you’ll be begging me to kill you. Or you could just take the easy way out. Dig me a hole and I’ll give you a nice quick death. Painless. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like a shitty deal. Either way I lose.”

“Yeah, but one way is much more painful than the other.”

“I have money—”

~~“I don’t give a shit about your money. You’re not getting out of this; you need to accept that fact. You can’t talk your way out, and you can’t buy your way out. Now choose, or I’ll choose for you.”~~

“I have a family,” Flanagan pleaded.

Slade swung the shovel, clipping him on the shoulder. Flanagan cried out in pain.

“Wait, wait; I’ll dig the fucking hole, you bastard!”

“Good.”

Slade tossed the shovel on the ground and took a step back, his hand going to the butt of the gun that hung at his hip, and resting there. Flanagan reached down and picked up the shovel. His shoulder throbbed where the blow had landed.

“Where should I dig?”

Slade pointed to a spot about fifteen feet away from the car.”

“There,” Slade said.

“It’s scorching hot out here. I’ll die from the heat before you get a chance to kill me.”

“I’ve got water in the car. Now dig.”

Flanagan took off his coat and tie, and dropped them to the ground. He walked to the general area that Slade had indicated and looked down at the ground. He didn’t think he would be able to dig a hole big enough to fit in if he dug all day from sunup to sundown. But he started digging anyway.

In less than five minutes he was panting harshly. In ten minutes his shirt was drenched with sweat. In twenty minutes his hands were starting to blister. He kept digging, preferring not to have his bones broken one by one. After a half hour of digging Slade gave him a five minute break, letting him drink some warm water from a gallon jug. Then it was time to resume digging.

It went on like that for a while, with occasional breaks for water. Eventually Flanagan discarded his sopping wet shirt, digging bare-chested. Slade kept his shirt on, though it was getting plenty damp. Well. The sun started its descent in the sky, and the day started to cool down just a little; it seemed to Flanagan like a small bit of mercy from the gods. When the sun met the horizon Flanagan stopped digging.

“It’s not enough,” Slade said. “Dig some more.”

“I can’t.”

“Dig.”

“I can’t! My hands are bleeding, for Christ’s sake. I’m tired. Every muscle in my body feels like it’s on fire.”

Slade said nothing; he just looked at Flanagan from eyes that were still hidden behind sunglasses. When Flanagan looked into them all he saw were twin reflections of himself, an exhausted and broken man.

“It’s not too late,” Flanagan said. “My offer still stands. A million...no, make it two million. We can get in the car and head back to town.”

Slade said nothing at all. His hand still rested on the butt of his gun. A warm breeze blew his hair around his head. He was like a wall, silent and inscrutable.

“I guess I’ll just dig, then,” Flanagan said.

Sometime later Slade tapped him on the shoulder. Flanagan stopped digging. The day was stuck in that peculiar place where it wasn’t light but it wasn’t quite dark.

“That’s enough,” Slade said.

Flanagan tossed the shovel aside.

“Listen,” he said. “You got a cigarette?”

“Don’t waste my time,” Slade said.

“I just want a fucking cigarette, okay? Is that so much to ask?”

Slade thought about it for a moment.

“No. No, I guess it’s not.”

Flanagan reached up and Slade took his hand, helping him up out of the hole. The hole was four feet deep, four and a half feet long and three feet wide. Even Slade was impressed that Flanagan had managed it without collapsing. Flanagan stretched the muscles in his arms and legs, trying to rub the ache out of them. His back was a hot nest of pain.

Slade reached into his coat pocket and grabbed his pack of cigarettes.

“You smoke Camels?” Slade asked.

“I’d smoke a rolled up piece of toilet paper right about now if there was tobacco in it.”

Slade laughed. Flanagan had moxie; he had to give him that. Slade handed him the cancer stick then reached back into his pocket and brought out a lighter. He lit the cigarette for the condemned man. Flanagan sucked smoke deep into his lungs, held it there, and then exhaled it in a sigh.

“That’s good,” Flanagan said.

“I’m sure it is.”

“I do have a family, you know. A wife and two kids.”

Flanagan waited for Slade to tell him to shut up. When this didn’t happen he went on.

“My son, Steve, is thirteen. He wants to try out for football with the county youth league. I told him I thought it was a good idea, but to be honest the kid’s not very good. He can’t pass, he can’t catch and he moves like a tortoise. If he was a big kid maybe he could play defense, but he’s skinny as hell. He’s a good kid though.”

Slade remained silent as Flanagan took another puff on the cigarette.

“My daughter’s name is Mary,” Flanagan continued. “She’s seven years old. She’s the prettiest little girl you’ve ever seen. She’s always drawing me pictures; she signs them and everything, just like a real artist. Sometimes I read her a story at bedtime. Not that often, I’m usually busy you know, but when I get the chance I like to do it. It makes her happy. My wife...well, I still love her. She loves me back in her own way. She was so...shit, I’m crying like a little bitch.”

Flanagan wiped away a few tears.

“I don’t want to die,” he said quietly.

“Nobody does,” Slade said. “But we all will eventually.”

“Why are you doing this? I’m offering you two million dollars. Whoever is paying you can’t be paying anything near that. What are you getting? Twenty grand? Thirty?”

“That’s my business. It doesn’t matter out here.”

Slade indicated the expanse of the desert with a sweep of his arms.

“Out here is where we finish things,” he continued.

“But it doesn’t have to be like—fuck it. I’m done trying to convince you. If you can afford to pay me on two million dollars, I don’t think three million will make a difference. Or four, for that matter.”

“So you understand at last.”

“Yeah, I understand real good.”

Flanagan took one last drag on the cigarette and threw it away.

“It’s time,” Slade said.

“Who hired you?” Flanagan asked.

“Come one; let’s go.”

“I need to know. I have a right to know.”

“You don’t have any rights, Mister Flanagan.”

“I need to know.”

Slade grabbed Flanagan’s arm and pulled him toward the hole.

“Wait, please. Just wait a minute!”

Slade stopped pulling on him.

~~“I’m asking you as man; please tell me. I want to know who paid money to have me killed.”~~

Slade sighed. He looked at the hole, then back at Flanagan.

“It’s means that much to you, even though you can’t do anything about it?”

“Yes,” Flanagan said. “It means that much to me.”

“All right. The guy who hired me is named Jenco. Claude Jenco.”

Flanagan flinched at the utterance of the name.

“Claude? Jesus Christ. I thought we were friends.”

“You should have picked better friends,” Slade said.

“No shit,” Flanagan aid, then barked out a mirthless laugh.

“Now you know. Let’s go.”

“All right,” Flanagan said. “I guess when it’s time, it’s time.”

Slade didn’t have to drag Flanagan along this time. The two men walked to the rim of the freshly dug hole. Flanagan stood at the edge for a moment, looking down into the hole; it looked like the opening of some great and dismal abyss. There was just the faintest hint of light now on the horizon. Flanagan lowered himself down into the hole. He stood looking up at his executioner; there was no need for more talk of money or family. This thing would be played out to its end. Slade unbuttoned the strap of his holster and withdrew the gun, keeping it pointed down at the ground.

“I really like you,” Slade said. “I’m sorry we had to meet under such circumstances as these.”

“So am I.”

Slade started to lift the barrel of the gun, but then a good portion of his forehead exploded outward with a pink vapor mist, and he fell to the ground like a sack of bricks.

Flanagan stood still for a moment, looking at the other man’s lifeless body as it lay on the ground, a pool of blood expanding slowly around the ruined head. Then he climbed up onto the edge of the hole and reached into Slade’s coat pocket, fishing out the pack of cigarettes and the lighter. As he propped a cigarette in his mouth he looked off into the distance. There was a pair of headlights far off, approaching. He lit the cigarette, using one hand to shield the flame from the wind, then put the lighter in his own pants pocket.

The headlights pulled up close; they belonged to a black SUV. One man climbed out of the vehicle, the driver remained behind the wheel.

“You okay?” the man asked Flanagan.

“Yeah, I’m okay. You sure took your time, though. You were supposed to clip him as soon as the gun was free of the holster.”

“Yeah, yeah. If you ask me, this whole thing was a bad idea. It would have been much easier just to sweep this guy up, take him out to one of our factories in Easton and tase him in his balls until he tells us what we wanted to know.”

“I didn’t ask you,” Flanagan said. “And I told you before; I know this type of guy. He would have kept his mouth shut right up to the end.”

“So you got what you needed?”

“Yeah, I got what I needed. Now help me up.”

The man helped Flanagan up on his feet.

“Hand me my clothes,” Flanagan said.

The man grabbed up the shirt, tie and suit jacket that had been discarded earlier. Flanagan put them back on.

“I’m gonna have Frankie drive me back to town,” Flanagan said. “You stay here and bury this prick, then drive his car back to town. Meet us at the place on 6th and Rosewood.”

“What then?”

“Then we’ll pay a visit to an old friend of mine, Claude Jenco. Think you can handle it?”

“No problem, boss.”

Flanagan climbed into the front passenger seat of the SUV, and the vehicle turned around and headed back the way it came. When he was finished with the cigarette he opened his window and flicked the butt out. He left the window open, and as they drove along he let the cool night air tousle his hair. It had been a hard day, but it was a beautiful night.

Ash lay on the ground like muddy snow. The bone-white light of a late-autumn moon caressed the gentle slopes of the hills beyond the road like a thin sheen of milk spilled over the Earth. A chill wind soughed through the gutters, an eerie moaning that made the hairs rise up on the back of Jack's neck. He let go of the curtain, allowing it to fall back into place and making the world outside disappear. Now all that was real in the world was the room he was standing in, and the people in it. Gary launched into another coughing fit from his spot on the floor by the fireplace; it sounded like loose change rattling around in a plastic cup. Sophie put a hand on his forehead and looked up at Jack with worry in her eyes. She didn't need to say anything for him to get the message: Gary was burning up.

Ben sat in the farthest corner of the room, as far away from his ailing father as he could. The boy's eyes were wide, making him look just like the scared eight-year-old boy that he was. Jack thought about taking a seat next to the boy, about putting a hand on his shoulder and saying a few comforting words about how it wasn't as bad as it looked, and that his father would be fine. He then decided against it; what was the point of telling the kid a lie? They all knew that Gary was deteriorating fast. Maybe if it was still like the old days, if they could take him to a hospital, to a doctor, get him some medicine...but the world which held those possibilities was gone now. The end of that world had come with neither a whimper nor a bang, but with a long, drawn-out sigh.

Instead he walked over near the fireplace and hunkered down on his haunches, holding out his hands to the licking flames like a sacrificial offering. Warmth spread through his hands and across his face; it felt wonderful. Sophie grabbed hold of Gary and started to move him.

"What are you doing?" Jack asked.

"I'm moving him away from the fire."

"No, leave him where he is."

"But Jack, he's hot."

"I know, but don't move him. You know better, Sophie; if you move him away from the heat he'll be freezing in a matter of minutes, and then you'll have to drag him back. We've seen it before. Leave him where he is and use the cloth."

Sophie grabbed a piece of cloth up off of the floor and dunked it into the bowl of water set near the door and then held the wet rag to Gary's head, letting streams of water run down the man's face. It had a strange effect, making it look almost like he was crying in his sleep. He stirred a bit and mumbled something unintelligible then. In the corner Ben wiped away a few tears that had fallen silently without as much as a sniffle.

The wind outside the shack picked up speed and whistled through cracks in the walls. Sophie set the damp rag aside and stared up at the ceiling with a look of apprehension on her face, as if expecting the roof to rip free of its moorings and sail away into the night. The wind died down a bit, and Sophie's eyes returned to the sick man on the floor.

There was a noise outside, and at first nobody paid it any mind, taking it for another trick of the wind. Then the noise grew louder and Jack realized that it was the sound of someone treading up the porch steps. He looked over at Sophie, who returned his gaze for just a moment before turning to the boy in the corner.

"Ben, come to me," she beckoned.

Ben crawled over to her, and she draped her arms over him protectively. Jack stood up and walked quickly and quietly to where the rifle was leaning against the wall. He lifted it up and aimed it at the door, breathing slowly and shallowly. There was a scraping sound as something made contact with the door, and then a soft tapping. Jack stood silent, his attention focused like a beam on the door and

whatever might come through it. Both Sophie and Ben remained quiet as well, but Gary began to slip into semi-consciousness. He reached out with one hand at nothing in particular, and his lips began to move wordlessly, a thin trail of spittle running down from one corner of his mouth. Sophie leaned down so that her mouth was near one ear.

"You must be quiet," she whispered. "Someone's outside."

"Mmph," was his response.

Jack's eyes were still on the door, the only entrance into the shack. His finger held a tight grip on the trigger; realizing this, he lightened the grip just slightly. There came a knock at the door.

"We don't want any trouble," Jack called out. "We're armed. Just leave us be."

A heavy silence slithered about the room, touching everything and settling over all, so that the only sounds were the crackling of the fire and the distant ocean sound of blood rushing in Jack's ears. The silence felt like a tenuous truce between those inside the shack and whatever lay without. Then a deep voice broke that truce.

"I don't mean to be a bother," the voice assured them, "but this is my home."

Jack looked at Sophie for a moment, hoping to get from her some idea about what he was supposed to do next. He found nothing but frightened eyes staring at him almost vacantly.

"We didn't know this place was being used," Jack said. "We just needed a place to spend the night. One of our people is sick, and we need to get him out of the cold for the night. We'll be gone in the morning."

"Very well," the voice responded. "In the meantime, where do you expect me to go?"

"I...I don't know. Just leave us be for the night. You have my word that we won't take anything of yours."

"Of course; there's nothing to take. But I still need to come in out of the cold. I have some food; I'll share it with you"

At the mention of food Jack's mouth began to water. He licked his dry, cracked lips.

"I'm sorry, but you can't come in," he said.

There was another silence as the man to whom that deep voice belonged contemplated what to do.

"Listen," the deep voice said. "I have a rifle, but it's slung over my shoulder. I mean no harm to you or yours. I'm coming in now."

Before Jack could respond the door swung open fast and slammed against the wall. Sophie and Ben cried out in fright, and Jack squeezed the trigger within a hairs breadth of firing.

"Sorry about that," the tall, bearded man standing on the porch said. "The wind and all, you know?"

The man stepped into the room and stomped his feet, dislodging caked up ash from his rubber boots. Over one shoulder was slung the rifle he'd spoken of, and over the other was slung a large sack. The bottom of the sack was wet, dripping a dark, viscous fluid onto the floor. The man unslung the sack and dropped it on the floor; it landed with a sickly thudding sound.

"The name's Fredrik," the man announced. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

Fredrik's gaze moved through the room, settling for a moment on everyone in turn, and finally stopping on the prone, sweating form of the sick man.

"Is he okay?"

Nobody answered the question; it was quite evident that Gary was not okay. Fredrik gave up waiting for a reply and turned back to shut the door. Jack kept his rifle aimed at the big man.

"I'm going to unslung my rifle," Fredrik said to him. "Is that all right with you?"

"Yeah, sure. Just do it slowly."

Fredrik took off the rifle and leaned it up against the wall near the door.

"So, what are your names?" he asked as he turned back to the room at large.

"Jack. Over there, that's Sophie and Ben. The sick one is Gary; he's Ben's father."

“Do you know what’s wrong with him?”

“What everybody gets eventually,” Sophie responded. “Ash Sickness. He started coughing about three days ago.”

“Hmm. Sorry to hear it.”

Fredrik picked up the sack and started toward where Sophie and Ben were kneeling near the prostrate Gary.

“Don’t go near them!” Jack warned.

Fredrik stopped in his tracks, holding up the hand that was not gripping the sack in a gesture of peace.

“Listen, fella, like I told you—this is my home. I appreciate that you’re trying to take care of your people, but I don’t like it when a guest holds me at gunpoint. Could you point that rifle somewhere else and let me do what I have to do?”

“What is it exactly that you’ve gotta do?” Jack asked, the rifle still pointed at Fredrik.

“I’ve got me a fawn,” Fredrik replied, holding up the bloody sack. “You know, a young deer? I like to cook it. Like I said before, you’re all welcome to share. First you have to put the rifle aside. Deal?”

Jack thought about it for a moment before relenting. He lowered the rifle and set it up against the wall. Fredrik smiled, revealing mossy green teeth.

“That’s more like it,” Fredrik said.

Jack kept a wary eye on the man as he took the fawn out of the sack—it had already been skinned and gutted. Next Fredrik reached in and retrieved the hide from the bag, setting it aside. From a sheath hidden within the folds of his thick coat the man produced a large, wicked-looking knife, which he used to carve up pieces of the fawn. He grabbed up a few metal rods lying on the floor near the fireplace, piercing one of them through a hunk of flesh. He held out the skewer to Jack.

“Just like roasting marshmallows,” Fredrik said with a grin.

Jack took the proffered meat and held it near the flickering fire. Fredrik did the same with another skewered piece of meat. As the meat began to cook, with juices dripping down into the flames, a thick aroma filled the room, causing mouths to water. Ben and Sophie eyed the searing flesh hungrily. Jack took care to rotate the skewer regularly, making sure not to burn one side while leaving the rest uncooked.

When he was satisfied that the meat was sufficiently cooked, Jack pulled it away from the flames and tore off a piece. It was hot, burning his fingers, but he blew on it a bit and popped it into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed, and the taste of the flesh and grease was exquisite. He held the skewer out to Ben.

“Here, this is for you,” he told the boy. “It’s good.”

Ben reached up and slid the meat free of the metal skewer, muttering something that might have been thanks. Fredrik offered the other skewer to Sophie, who accepted the food with a grateful smile.

“Thank you so much,” she said.

Fredrik and Jack skewered two more hunks of meat and cooked them. While he ate Jack kept one eye on Gary, who was no longer drenched with sweat, but now looked inhumanly pale in his dreamlike slumber. He caught Sophie’s eye and saw that she understood as well as he did that Gary’s suffering was almost done. The hours passed, and one by one they all drifted off to sleep, contented in a way that only those with a full belly had any right to be.

When Jack awoke in the morning he found that the fire had died out sometime during the night, and the room had grown chilly. He looked over at the slumbering forms of the others, then stood and walked over to the window near the front door. He pushed the curtain aside and looked out at the gunmetal gray morning. A light fog hugged the ground. He let the curtain fall back into place and

turned back to the room. He went to check on Gary, leaning down next to the man and moving aside the blanket that Fredrik had given them to cover him with. Gary no longer simply looked pale, but sickly gray color with a slight blue tint. When Jack touched the man's cheek with the back of one hand he knew that it was finally over.

By the time the others woke up Jack had already dragged Gary's cold body outside. After filling the other adults in on the situation, Jack led Ben outside and around to the back of the shack, where he had left Gary. He gave the boy some space and let him cry a little; then he sent Ben back inside and Fredrik joined Jack. They took turns digging a hole with an entrenching tool that Fredrik produced. When the hole was deep enough they rolled Gary into it and covered his body with dirt.

Tired and cold, they were grateful for the warmth of the fire that Sophie had got going in their absence. They cooked what was left of the fawn and ate a hearty lunch, washing it all down with water from a jug that Fredrik promised had been boiled.

Late afternoon. Jack and Sophie waited while Ben went around back to say one last goodbye to the mound of earth where his father lay.

"Where will you go?" Fredrik asked while they waited.

"West," Jack answered.

"Why west?"

"Why not west?"

"You're free to stay here, you know."

"No, it's better to keep moving," Jack said, shaking his head. "Thanks for the offer, though."

The boy rejoined them and the threesome set off. Fredrik stood watching them as they walked on. Ben kept glancing back at the man who had given them shelter and food, if only for one night. Fredrik got smaller, was farther away every time he looked back. Finally he couldn't see him at all.

The Mimic

Kim Vargo made a left onto Madison St., the street where she and her family had lived since Cale—her oldest son—was born. It was just past 8 o'clock, and the streetlamps along Madison fought against the inky blackness of night, throwing little yellow pools on the pavement, still wet from a light shower that had just passed. Yawning, she rolled smoothly along until she could see the orange rectangle of light that marked the spot she called home. She pulled into the driveway and killed the engine, then began collecting her things—her purse, some paperwork—making sure not to forget anything. As she looked up she saw the curtain in the living room window move aside, and Sean—her husband—peeking out. He smiled, gave her a little wave, and disappeared; the curtain swung back into place; a smile played across Kim's lips.

She opened the door and dropped one leg onto the ground; as she was about to swing her other leg out of the car her cellphone rang. She thought about not answering it until she was inside the house but changed her mind and went digging in her purse for the phone. Having found it, she peeked at the display and what she saw there caused one eyebrow to shoot up in mild bemusement—the name SEAN beamed up at her from the phone. She looked up at the now-vacant window and wondered to herself why on God's green Earth he was calling her when he knew she would be in the house in just a moment. She pushed the RECEIVE button and put the phone to her ear.

"What is it, Sean?" she asked.

"Hey, are you home yet?" he asked in turn.

For a second she didn't know how to answer the question; he had just seen her with his own two eyes.

"Yes, of course, but why—"

"I just wanted to let you know that me and the kids will be home about twenty minutes," Sean said. "I brought them out for a late snack."

A cold feeling spread within her chest. Once again she looked at the window, that rectangle of light looking out from the living room.

"Sean, where are you?" she asked quietly.

"We're at McDonald's. We'll be leaving here in just a minute. Listen, I've gotta go honey, I have to deal with a situation here. Patrick, give her back the toy or else—"

The phone went dead, leaving Sean's threat to their unruliest child unfinished. Kim slipped the phone back into her purse and sat frozen in place for a moment, in a haze of confusion. She looked up at the front door of the house as someone (who was certainly not her husband) opened it from inside. The door opened just a crack and then stopped; it was an invitation to come on already, come inside and see what's waiting for you.

Kim slowly drew her leg back into the car before pulling the door shut, doing her best not to make too much noise. She slipped the keys back into the ignition and turned it; the engine came back to life with a low rumble. With her eyes still on the open door of the house she shifted into reverse and pressed lightly on the gas pedal. The car crept slowly back out onto the street. As she began to turn the wheel the front door of her house flew all the way open and Sean-who-was-not-Sean appeared in the doorway. He was visibly breathing heavily and he bared his teeth at her. What she saw then were a set of sharp teeth that reminded her of a great white shark. Incredulity overcame her for a moment and she sat there in the car, with her foot on the break, staring at the Sean-thing standing in the doorway of her home, backlit by light from the living room lamp, staring at her with a gaping mouth and hate in its eyes.

The Sean-thing broke into a run then, coming at her fast. She shifted into drive and stomped on the

pedal. The back tires screeched and smoked as they spun in place for a moment, trying to gain traction on the wet street. Then she was off, speeding down Madison and away from her house. She looked up at the rearview mirror and saw the Sean-thing chasing after her, falling farther behind with each passing second.

She made a right turn onto Carver St. , and then another turn, and another. After a series of random turns (careful not to turn around in a circle and head back the way she had come), and when she was no longer certain exactly where she was, she slowed down to a sane speed and reached over to her purse. She reached in and picked out her cell; she thought about dialing as she drove, but remembered every dire warning she had ever given Sean about the dangers of doing just that, and so pulled over and parked on the side of the street. She checked the mirror to make sure that no one—or *nothing*—was behind her. Satisfied that danger was not closing in from behind, she turned her attention back to the cellphone.

Gripping the cell tightly she debated with herself. Her first instinct was to call 911, but for some reason she thought that informing the dispatcher that she needed help because something with a set of wickedly sharp teeth, and that looked like her husband—but was not her husband—was chasing after her, and could they please send some help (the Ghostbusters, perhaps?) didn't seem like a good idea. Her next thought was to call Sean—but would that conversation go any better than the one she would have with a 911 dispatcher?

Well, hell, I have to call somebody, she thought.

She scrolled to her husband's name in her contact list and pressed SEND. The line rang once, twice; after the fourth ring the recording picked up:

“Hey, this is Sean, leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as—”

She ended the call.

“Damn it, Sean,” she hissed.

Kim understood that most likely he hadn't answered her call because he was on the road with the kids, heading back home, and that she *had* told him too many times to recount not to answer the phone while driving, but even so it pissed her off. She felt that he should have known by some (possibly imperceptible) tone of the ring that this call was different, more urgent, an emergency. Why couldn't people just do the right thing when you needed them to?

And then her breath caught in her throat. He was probably on the road with the kids, headed home. Home, where the Sean-thing might be lying in wait for someone to come back, to come into the house. Those teeth....

“Oh shit!” she spoke aloud to herself.

She shifted back into drive and drove to the next cross street, stopping to look up at the street name to gauge where she was. The sign read *Lexington Ave*. She referenced the map in her head of the neighborhoods surrounding the street where she and her family lived until she was certain that she knew where she was on that map. Lexington—she could make it home about five minutes if she ignored the speed limit.

Kim turned left onto Reed, followed it for three blocks, and then made another left onto Cardinal. She continued on in this way, following that mental map. As she was speeding along a lonely stretch of Hartford St. she gasped as something heavy clunked on the roof of the car. She eased off of the gas pedal a bit as she stared up, wondering what in the hell could have fallen on her car.

There was a loud crash as something struck the windshield. Kim screamed out and hit the brakes. The Sean-thing came briefly into view as it was thrown forward, off of her car, and then it disappeared as it fell out of her sightline. For a moment Kim sat stunned into inaction, but the moment of confusion didn't last long. She hit the gas, intending to run the damn thing over. She screamed again as the Sean-thing jumped back up into view, landing on the hood of the car. It slammed one meaty fi

through the windshield, and then used both of its hands to pull at the glass and widen the hole. Glass fragments fell in a shower around her legs and feet. In shock Kim pressed down even harder on the accelerator, and the speedometer ticked passed sixty, then seventy.

The hole in the windshield was about the size of a bowling ball now. The Sean-thing tried to fit its head through the hole, but couldn't quite make it. It put its face up to the hole then and bared its teeth at her, letting out something that she could only think of as a growl; she could smell the thing's putrid breath, a cross between rancid meat and an outhouse. Her eyes watered with the stench of it.

She took her foot off of the gas, tapped the brakes lightly until the car lost some of its speed, and then stamped on the brakes. The Sean-thing was again thrown free of the car. It had been thrown free enough so that Kim could see it lying there on the ground in the glare of her headlights. There was no sign of movement. Then she saw a slight twitch, so small that she wasn't completely sure that she hadn't imagined it. She shifted into reverse and started to back away from the wretched thing. As she backed up the Sean-thing sprang up quickly, as if it hadn't just been thrown from a moving vehicle, and turned toward her. It broke into a run, and Kim pressed harder on the gas pedal. Still the Sean-thing came on, running faster than any man, impossibly closing the distance between them.

Kim's mind was pulled in two directions: one part of her knew that she should be looking back to see where she was going, but another part was loathe to take her eyes off of the creature for even one second. Caught between these two courses of action, she lost control of the car. The wheel slipped out of her grip and the car jerked to the right. She got her hands back on the wheel and hit the brakes, but not soon enough—there was a sudden jolt as the car backed into a tall oak tree.

“What the...?”

She looked around the interior of the car in a daze. The fragments of glass that had been knocked out of the windshield had been tossed about on impact, and some of them were now resting in her lap. Her mind cleared enough for her to remember the situation she was in, and she turned her attention to the world outside the car. The Sean-thing was nowhere in sight.

Her cellphone rang then. She searched for her purse, but couldn't see it anywhere. The chirping sounded like it was coming up from below her. She reached down and snaked one hand beneath her seat, searching blindly for the handbag. Her hand touched on something and she grabbed it and dragged it out from under the seat. It was indeed her purse, and the cell chirped again from within. She looked at the display—it read SEAN. She hit RECEIVE.

“Sean, you have to help me!”

“Kim, are you there? Where are you, babe?”

“Sean, something is after me, please—”

“Hello? Kim? I can't hear you. We're home now, and the kids are about to hit the sack. Are you almost home?”

“Sean, listen carefully. You have to call the police—”

The window beside her exploded as the Sean-thing reached in and grabbed her. She let out a guttural scream from deep within her as it pulled her out through the space where a window used to be. She was thrown to the ground so hard that her teeth clacked together painfully.

“Sean, help me!” she screamed.

The last thing she saw were those horrible teeth, set in a face that looked like her husband's. The night was filled with an ear-shattering scream, and then the scream was cut off, returning a gentle silence to the evening. But the silence didn't last long; a voice could be heard from within the battered car.

“Kim? I can't hear you; you're gonna have to call me back. Or better yet, just get home, okay? The kids want you to kiss them goodnight. Love ya.”

Bernie scooped the food into the blue bowl. It was Tammy's favorite, yellowfin tuna and shrimp with wild rice in gravy. Bernie didn't like to spoil the girl, and usually only gave her her favorite once a week, but this would be the third day in a row he served it for her. It was a special occasion of sorts, a get-well-soon treat for Tammy. A couple days before she had come in from playing outside, and she was limping quite severely. Upon inspection Bernie had found a small wound on her right front leg—it looked like it might be a small bite, but he wasn't sure.

His first thought was to take her to the vet, but one look in the money envelope he kept hidden behind the dresser beside his bed had put that idea out of his head. He was broke, even broke than usual, and there was no money for a vet visit. Instead he rubbed some of the blue salve that Gertie Crabb had given him long ago, swearing that it could cure just about any type of ailment. He had never gotten around to using it, and Gertie Crabb had passed some time ago, gone to that great bingo hall in the sky. He spread the thick ointment on the wound (which didn't look that bad he decided, no real need for a vet), and wrapped a strip of cloth around Tammy's leg. The next day, when he took off the cloth, the wound was almost completely healed, and Bernie gave silent thanks to Gertie for her mystery miracle salve.

Although the wound had healed remarkably fast, leaving only a small bald patch roughly the size of a dime on Tammy's leg as the only sign of the original injury, the whole episode seemed to have upset the girl deeply, and for the past couple days she had been lethargic and moody.

Bernie finished scooping out the food and stood up, his arthritic legs giving protest. He tossed the can in the trash and used his foot to nudge the bowl closer to the little bed he had made for Tammy near the wall. He made little kissing sounds through pursed lips.

"Come on, old girl, eat you scrumshums."

Tammy made a deep purring noise, but didn't move. Bernie tapped the side of the bowl with the corner of his shoe.

"Come on, eat up. It's your favorite."

Tammy raised herself out of her little bed and walked to the bowl. She sniffed at the food, looked up at Bernie, and then back down at the food. Finally she leaned her head down and started eating.

"Good kitty," Bernie said as he bent down to stroke Tammy. "You sure are getting big. Maybe we have to think about putting you on a diet, girl. You eat while Daddy takes a little nap."

He left her to her meal, and went back to his bedroom. He kicked off his shoes, climbed into bed, and pulled the covers up.

When he woke, it was dark out. Bernie checked the bedside clock, and then cursed at himself; his "little nap" had ended up being three hours long. He knew he would be up until two in the morning now, unable to fall asleep at a proper time. He slipped out of bed and shuffled out of the bedroom and into the bathroom, where he relieved his bladder with a sigh of satisfaction. He flushed, washed his hands, and went out, taking a seat on the couch in the living room. He picked up the remote and clicked on the TV. He channel surfed (as much as one *can* channel surf when one only gets network TV) and settled on the evening news. He left the volume turned down, not much interested in the day's happenings.

In the dim blue light of the television a shape appeared, sauntering over to Bernie. Tammy settled down near his feet. He reached down without looking and stroked her fur. Something didn't feel quite right, so he looked down at her.

"My God. You really are getting big, aren't you girl? I could swear you've gotten bigger since just this morning."

Tammy gave a soft purr in agreement. The rest of the night was uneventful, and to his own surprise Bernie was able to get to sleep at a reasonable time despite his long nap earlier in the day.

In the morning Bernie made himself a cup of instant coffee while squinting at the harsh light of dawn streaming in through the small kitchen window. As he drank off the cup of terrible-tasting coffee he searched around for Tammy, who he usually found still in her kitty bed early in the morning, but who was conspicuously absent on this particular day. He strolled through the house—the living room, the dining room, and then back to the kitchen; she was nowhere to be found.

“Where in the hell did that girl get off to?” he asked the empty room.

It was then that he noticed the screen door. There was a hole in the bottom left-hand corner; it was ragged, as if something had chewed right through it. Considering the size of the hole, Bernie’s first thought was that a coyote had chewed its way in sometime during the night. He rushed out the door, the screen slapping shit behind him, looking every which way.

“Tammy, where are you?” he called out. “For chrissakes, don’t hide from me now.”

He caught movement from the corner of his eye. He turned to find a strange sight. At first he was certain that it couldn’t be Tammy, that the animal he saw was much too large to be his girl. But the coat was that same familiar charcoal gray, shot through with darker patches, including the one patch that Bernie always told people looked just like the state of Florida. She was facing away from him with her head bent down to the ground; it looked like she was working at something, perhaps a mouse or an unlucky bird. For a moment Bernie just stood there, looking at her, wondering at the size of her. She looked about as big as Max, Ralph Thompson’s Border collie. Then he saw blood. He broke into a sprint, but when he got near her Tammy whirled around and bared her teeth at him with a sharp hiss. The fur around her muzzle was stained red, with little chunks of something (Bernie tried not to think of the word “flesh”) stuck in her whiskers.

“What’s wrong?” Bernie said. “It’s just me, girl. Let me take a look at you. Are you hurt?”

He took another step closer, and then he saw what it was that Tammy had been busy with, the source of the blood. It was a dead animal, all right, but it wasn’t any mouse or bird. He wasn’t completely sure (the thing was a ruined mess), but he thought it looked like another cat. There was no collar, so it was a cat it was a stray.

“Goddamn, Tammy, what a mess. Come on, inside now. Go.”

She stood her ground, staring him in the eye, unmoving, her breathing short and quick. Then she started toward the house, and Bernie nearly breathed a sigh of relief; with the shock of both her newfound size and the mangled thing that might be a stray cat fresh in his mind, he wasn’t exactly in a hurry to try and pick her up.

Back in the house Bernie closed the screen door, and after once again taking a look at the hole that had been chewed through it (by a coyote, he had thought at first, but now he knew better), he closed the door as well. Tammy was lying in her bed in the kitchen, although the bed now looked comically small for her frame. Bernie walked past her and into the living room, where he sat down on the couch. The living room seemed dim in spite of the early-morning light coming in through the window.

Something had happened to Tammy. Something was *still* happening, perhaps. He tried to think what it could have been, what could have caused the sudden change in size. All he could think of was the wound she had acquired a few days before, the thing he thought looked like a small bite, but it had healed up nicely with Gertie’s blue salve.

He thought again about taking Tammy to the vet, but he didn’t have the money, and without a car it would be a forty minute walk into town just to be turned away by the prick animal doctor who had taken over when Simpkins died. He thought about calling someone, but there was no one to call. And what would he tell someone if he did call them? *Help, my cat is getting huge!?*

That evening, after putting it off for as long as possible, he emptied a can of chicken and gravy into

Tammy's bowl, and set it near her. She watched him as he worked, and sat unmoving, following him with her gaze, until he left the kitchen; only then did she eat. That night, when Bernie went to bed, he did the strangest thing: he locked his bedroom door. He wasn't sure why he did it (*cats can't open doors, you shithead*, he thought to himself), but he did it anyway. It took him a while to get to sleep and when he did sleep he had terrible dreams of being chased, but in the dreams he wasn't quite sure who or what was chasing him, only that if he was caught he was done for.

In the morning he sat on his bed awhile, not wanting to go out there, not wanting to see Tammy. Then he was struck by a wonderful thought: what if the whole thing had been a dream? What if everything, the hole in the screen door, the Border collie-sized Tammy, the dead stray cat (if it had indeed been a cat), what if all of it had been a part of the long series of nightmares? What if the whole previous day had been one long bad dream?

The idea so excited him that Bernie shot out of bed, unlocked the door (he didn't stop to wonder how, if the previous day had been a dream, his door was still locked) and went looking for Tammy, for his good girl Tammy. He checked the kitchen, but her bed was empty. He went into the living room and stopped cold in his tracks. There was a trail of mud and something else, something brighter, leading away from the living room window. The window itself had been left open the night before (the night that was not a dream, after all), but the screen was missing, as if something had knocked it out. He followed the trail with his eyes; it disappeared down the dark hall that led to the empty garage.

He walked slowly to the entryway of the hall. It was too dark to see the end of the hall, or the door to the garage. He reached for the switch and flipped it up, and in the light he saw Tammy, with her head pressed up against the closed garage door and her head buried deep into the flesh of an animal, or half of an animal rather; it looked like the hindquarters of a deer. A strange sound escaped Bernie through his teeth, then, a strangled, mewling sound. Tammy's head came up at the sound, her muzzle smothered in gore. Bernie took one step back, and then another. Tammy stood then, and he could see that she was now as big as a mountain lion, but with that same familiar coat, gray with black patches. She growled at him with a deep, bass growl that sent adrenaline streaming through his body with a warning flashing in his mind: **GET OUT! YOU ARE NOT SAFE HERE!**

He turned and ran for the front door, but halfway there he swerved for the window with the missing screen, and hoped he was making the right choice. On the one hand he wasn't sure if his old knees could get him up and over the windowsill, and on the other hand it would save him the time it would take to unlock the deadbolt and throw back the chain on the door. He ran as fast as his legs would allow, and when he was just a couple steps away from the window, he jumped, his hands held out in front of him, trying to make his frame as small as possible so that it would fit through the window. As he went sailing through the window a feeling of pride welled up inside him.

This old boy still has a few tricks up his sleeve, he thought triumphantly.

Just as his feet hit the ground something hit him from behind; it felt like he had been clipped by a Mack truck. He tumbled face first onto the ground, the wind knocked out of him. He tried to lift himself up, but then a weight descended upon him, driving him back to the ground. He heard another growl, low and dangerous.

"No, girl; it's me. It's me!"

Then he felt something like a punch in the back. For a second he felt nothing else, and then a horrible searing pain bloomed in the center of his back. That's when the screaming began.

The Hunters

His luck had to run out sometime, he supposed. He had never really had much of it anyway. They had him surrounded. In spite of the desperate situation he was in, he couldn't suppress a smile at the thought of it; they were out there right now, smug, complacent; sure of their own power. They were hunters who had grown accustomed to easy prey. They thought he was just sitting here in his room, none the wiser, a helpless fool awaiting the slaughter. But he saw them, and saw through them. He had been running from the jackals so long that he could even smell them. There were two of them now, a man and a woman, leaning against a car and locked in an embrace. It was an act, of course. They were just waiting for the word, for some signal to move, to kick in the door of his motel room and snuff him out. Where there were two of them, there were sure to be more. That's how they operated.

He moved away from the window, carefully setting the curtain back in place so that it wouldn't move too much. The room was dark; he wanted them to think he was asleep. He grabbed the duffel bag that held all of his worldly possessions and lifted the strap over his head, settling it onto his shoulder. The heavy weight of the bag bit into his shoulder, but it wasn't too bad. He went into the bathroom and closed the door. The bathroom was small, with a toilet, a stand-up shower and a sink crammed into it in such a way that he was sure the architect had been a fan of the game Tetris. The only light was the faint glow of a streetlamp coming in through the opaque window set high above the toilet tank.

He unslung the bag and set it down, cramming it under the sink to give himself room to move around. After lowering both the seat and lid of the toilet, he stepped up onto it and reached up to turn the knob that locked the window in place. When he pressed on the window it didn't want to budge. He pushed harder and his right foot slid out from under him on the smooth surface of the toilet lid. He braced himself against the wall and managed to catch his balance. With his feet planted a little more firmly (he hoped), he tried again. This time the window moved, the bottom edge moving out and up. It moved slowly, but it was moving.

When he had pushed the window up as far as it would go he hopped down off of the toilet and grabbed his bag out from under the sink. He stepped back up onto the toilet and used both arms to lift up the duffel bag, sliding it out the window. It was a tight squeeze, but he managed it, giving the duffel one final big push so that it wouldn't be in his way when he came down. The bag fell to the ground with a loud thump. The window was too high for him to pull himself up, so he stepped up on the toilet tank while holding onto the lip of the window for balance. From this new position he was able to climb up and through the window, twisting himself around as he did so, so that he was sitting on the windowsill.

He tried to back himself out of the window as slowly as he could, trying to get a foot up on the sill. But he got he lost his balance and fell back, tumbling out of the open window. He hit the ground hard; the wind was knocked out of him, and for a moment tiny bright pinpricks exploded before his eyes, dancing around and disappearing as new points of light bloomed. He lay there for a minute, catching his breath, until the pinpricks all went away. He was fully aware that a clock was ticking somewhere and that he needed to get away from this place. Still, he waited until he felt he was ready to move on. When he finally gained his feet his head swam a little, but he steadied himself against the brick wall of the building, and in a moment he felt better. He dusted himself off and picked up his bag, slinging the strap back over his head.

The motel was at his back and before him there was a big, weedy field; beyond the field there were woods. That was the way, he decided. He started off across the empty field, crouch-running, zigging left and zagging right as he went just in case they had shooters on the roof. When he made it to the woods he dove into the safety of the shadows. Leaning out from behind a tree he looked back the way

he had come. He didn't see any of them; even the roof appeared clear. They must still think he is in the room. Good.

He set off through the woods. There were noises in the dark, but they didn't bother him; they were normal noises, nature noises, little furry animals scurrying to and fro, heavy branches groaning, leaves rustling. He flew through the darkness, an occasional branch whipping him in the face.

He tripped over an exposed root and went sprawling, twisting his ankle as he went down. He sat up and moved his foot around in small circles; it hurt, but not terribly. He used the side of a tree to push himself up, standing on his good foot. He tested the other one hesitantly, putting a little weight on it and then a little more. It wasn't so bad. He went on, at a fast walk now that he was not quite able to run.

When he came to the edge of the woods he waited for a while. There was a road running past, and he watched, waiting for a car to come along. He wondered if they had made their move yet back at the motel, if they had discovered the empty room. Would they follow him into the woods? Of course they would. But he couldn't act rashly; that would be a certain death sentence.

A pair of headlights was approaching. He unzipped a side pocket of the duffel bag and reached in, grasping the pistol he stashed there. Just in case. He walked out of the woods and to the side of the road. He lifted up his free hand and waved it up high at the oncoming vehicle. The car slowed, and he waited, tense, for some sign of malevolence, some sign that the hunters had been one step ahead of him all along and had known he would end up here, on this road, and had taken precautions. The car stopped, and he bent down to look in the passenger-side window. Relief washed through him. A middle-aged man with a thick mustache was behind the wheel, and a young boy—his son, most likely—was in the passenger seat. The hunters didn't bring their kids along with them; he knew he was safe. The window rolled down with a low electric whine.

"You need a ride?" the driver asked.

"Yeah, that would be great."

"Hop in, then. Billy, get in the back."

The boy (Billy, evidently) opened the door and got out of the car, then opened the back door and got back in.

The front seat welcomed him, and he got into the car, resting the duffel bag on his lap, and closed the door. He pushed the window button to roll it back up.

"Thanks for stopping," he said with genuine gratitude.

You don't know it, buddy, but you may have just saved my life, he thought.

"No hassle," the driver said. "Where ya headed?"

He thought about it, trying to remember the lay of the land from a map of the area he had spent some time studying.

"Rich Road," he answered.

"There's not much around Rich Road. Just a few farms out that way."

"Yeah, my brother has a small farm there. Listen, if it's out of your way, I—"

"No, don't worry about it; it's fine," the driver assured him.

They were off. As they drove along the driver turned on the radio, hitting the buttons to switch between a few pre-set stations. A Top 40 station was followed by smooth jazz, which gave way to a country station—the driver certainly had some varied tastes, he thought. Finally the driver settled on a channel that was broadcasting an advertisement for a local window repair company. The ad ended with a jingle:

"Don't despair, don't hesitate. Dial three-five-five oh-four-six-eight!"

The radio spot ended, and after a moment of silence a husky voice broke in:

"This is Randy St. Clair with a WNBO 'update on the eight'. Congress is set to hold a hearing on—"

He tuned the voice out. Politics didn't interest him much. He looked out the window at the passing scenery—or what little of it he could see at that time of night. He didn't know what his next move was. No matter how fast he ran, they always caught up with him. He'd been running for so long, and he was tired. Sometimes he thought about just putting a bullet in his head and painting a wall with the contents of his skull, just to be done with the whole mess. But he just couldn't do it. It would give the sons of bitches too much satisfaction to know that they had finally beaten him, that they had won. Fuck 'em.

“Authorities are warning the public to be on the lookout for anyone behaving suspiciously. They think the subject known as the Parcel Killer may be in the area.”

This brought his attention back to the radio.

“The Parcel Killer earned that nickname because of his habit of sending packages to various news outlets with parts of his victims' bodies. So far the killer has claimed—”

The radio was silenced by the driver.

“Terrible,” the driver said. “We've got some sick people walking around these days. You know what I mean?”

He looked at the driver, who looked back at him for an instant before looking back at the road. In that one brief instant of eye contact he thought he had seen something in the driver's eyes. He wasn't sure what it had been, exactly, but there was something there, something that unnerved him. He looked straight ahead at the road, his mind racing. Was it a coincidence that this car just happened to come along when he needed it? There was a kid, sure, but maybe the hunters had gotten a little smarter, had figured that he would never suspect someone who had a kid in the car with them. Maybe they had even trained the kid; stranger things had happened, and didn't they use child soldiers in Africa all the time? It made a weird kind of sense.

He had broken out in a sweat. He risked a look to his left, at the driver. The man appeared to be concentrating on the road, but that didn't mean much. Hunters could see you when they weren't even looking at you; he knew that well enough by now. He looked up at the rearview mirror, but the boy was out of his field of vision. What was he up to back there?

He could even smell them now, that unmistakable hunter stench. How could he have missed it? His hand slipped into the side pocket of the bag. He moved slowly, without looking down. He kept his gaze on the road, just like he didn't know any better, like they had him fooled. The pistol grip felt cool in his hand, and that seemed right. It was a cold business he was caught up in. There was a red STOP sign up ahead, and he waited. When the car came to a stop the driver looked to the left for any oncoming traffic; there was none. As the driver turned his head to check in the other direction there was a flash of light, and an explosion of sound that was followed by the sound of the window on the driver's side shattering as the bullet that tore through his brain exited his skull and hit it.

He acted quickly then, on pure instinct. He reached over and put the car in PARK, then turned to face the boy. The boy's eyes looked like saucers, or two big moons, and his mouth was wide open in a silent scream, the sound that wanted to come out caught in his throat. Another shot, and that young face was gone, replaced by a red and ragged mess.

A scream filled the car, and he turned back to the driver in a panic, sure that the man was somehow still alive. But that man was still slumped over in his seat, and most assuredly dead. The scream came again, and he turned to the back seat. He leaned over and looked down, and let out a little gasp at what he saw there. There was a young girl lying flat beside the dead boy. She must have been there the whole time; taking a nap, perhaps. He hadn't seen her, but he knew that if he had it wouldn't have changed anything. It wasn't his fault that she was involved. The hunters were so cruel that they didn't even hesitate to put their own children in harm's way just to catch their prey. It was terrible, and it was horrifying—but it wasn't his fault.

“I’m sorry, sweetie” he said.

One last shot, and it was done.

He got out of the car, ran around to the driver’s side and opened the door. He pushed the driver over and got behind the wheel. He drove around for a while, eventually finding an ideal spot, far from the main roads, on a dirt track that looked like it hadn’t been used since the Nixon administration. He killed the engine, got out of the car and pulled all of them out. He took out his bag, unzipped it and pulled out the necessary tools—a saw and a large knife with a serrated edge. Then he got down to business, and it was indeed a cold one.

When morning arrived nobody paid much attention to the car that drove up to the post office on Main Street. It parked on the other side of the street, and an average-looking man got out and ran into the P.O. with a small package in his hand. The package was addressed to Randy St. Clair, in care of WNBO, and the return address was phony. When the man came out of the post office he stood for a minute beside the car. Again no one took much notice. The man opened the passenger door and took out a duffel bag, then went around to the back of the car and popped open the trunk. He looked into the trunk with a look on his face that could be described as fascination by anyone who had happened to see it; no one did. No one noticed as the man closed the trunk again, leaving the keys dangling from the lock, or when he walked away, leaving the car behind, disappearing around the Highland Rx. And when something started leaking from the trunk, leaving a small maroon pool on the roadway beneath it, no one noticed that either for a time.

At least the realtor lady was nice. The one who had shown them the last house had acted like she didn't give a crap if they bought the house or not. Guess she figured if they didn't buy it, someone else would. Dad had gone with them that time; this time it was just Matt and Mom. The lady was showing Mom the kitchen now, but Matt was still interested in the "secret" room she had shown them just a minute ago. There was a section of wall that, if pushed on just the right way, slid open, revealing a long, dark hall that led down to a small room. Matt had asked her why the room was there; she didn't know.

As the lady led Mom further into the house Matt decided to take another look at the hidden room. He walked down the sloping hall until he was in the room, slightly below ground level. There was a light socket, but no bulb. The room was dimly lit with whatever light could reach it down the long hallway. The walls were made of concrete, smooth with only a few cracks. He ran a hand along one of the walls; the hand came away slightly damp.

His mind conjured up images of what this room may once have been use for. Maybe the room had been built in the days of Prohibition. The Mob owned the house, and this room was where they stored a cache of bootleg liquor. Maybe a spy had once lived here, and this room was where he kept his top secret documents, and his equipment for transmitting secret messages. Even better, maybe—

"Por favor."

It was barely a whisper. Matt whipped around, but there was nobody there. He stared up the hallway and saw only the dim rectangle of light that marked the open doorway.

"Por favor!"

The voice was louder this time, a young boy's voice. Matt thought he could detect fear in it.

"Where are you?" Matt spoke aloud to the empty room.

"Por favor el señor, no me lastima."

Matt tried to remember what he'd learned in those Spanish classes he took last year.

Por favor el señor, no me lastima. Please mister, don't hurt me.

"Who are you?" Matt asked. "Um... quién son usted?"

"El es lo que usted merece, pendejo!"

This was a different voice, a man's voice, angry. Matt's arms broke out in gooseflesh.

"Por favor! No me mate, por favor!"

The boy's voice again. *Don't kill me, please!*

Then there was a loud, animalistic grunt and a scream of pain. Matt covered his ears and ran up into the light, into the sane world above ground. He slid the wall/door back into place and waited for Mom in the car. As they drove home she prattled on about how great the house was, but Matt wasn't really listening; his thoughts were elsewhere. As they came to a stop at a red light he interrupted her stream of talk.

"Mom, I don't think we should move there."

"Why not, honey? Didn't you like it?"

"Mom, please, I don't want to go back to that house."

She looked at her son then, saw the tears in his eyes.

"Matt, what's wrong?"

"Just please, Mom, okay?"

She thought for a moment. The light turned green and they started moving again.

"I'll tell your father we didn't like this one. We'll look for a better place next week."

Matt wiped the tears away with a sleeve.

“Thanks, Mom.”

There was a lot of traffic. They didn't get home until after dark.

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