

Stranded in Jackson

I didn't really know what to say. So I looked around and lit a cigarette. It was getting dark, and the taillights from Tina's car had already disappeared over a hill. Steve and I were stuck on a country road in the middle of New Jersey.

"It looks like we're walking," I said.

Steve told me he was sorry.

"It's no worry."

"I didn't even want to go tonight. That's the worst part." He sounded annoyed. "I don't even like those people." He accentuated "those" as if the people we went to high school with were fundamentally different from us as if they were a different species as if the ten years since graduation had turned childhood friends into strangers.

"They're not so bad. We've know them a long time. And didn't you sell Geoff and Tammy their house?"

"That doesn't mean that I have anything to say to them."

"You always have something to say," I said.

"Some of us have to make a living. We can't all cover ourselves in street art and walk around like a Coney Island sideshow." Steve put his hands on his hips and looked down the road towards the hill Tina had disappeared over. "Where the hell are we?"

"Somewhere in Jackson," I said.

"Shit. I hate Jackson." Steve crossed his arms and looked down at his feet. He was wearing a long sleeved black shirt, jeans, and flip flops.

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“Some beer would make this walk a hell of a lot easier.” I took another drag off of my cigarette and coughed. The red lit tip illuminated the clock face tattooed on the back of my hand. It told time backwards. My mother called it a conversation starter. My father called it dumb.

“A bus would make this walk a hell of a lot easier. Give me a cigarette, will ya Jimmy?”

I pulled the pack out of my breast pocket and tossed it to him. I could barely make out the outline as it spun in the air before bouncing off of Steve’s chest and falling to the ground.

Bending over, he patted the ground for a few seconds before finding the pack and then asked me if I thought she would come back for us.

“Do you want her to?”

“Would sure beat walking.”

“I’m not even sure why she kicked us out.” Squatting down, I felt the ground to see if it was wet or infested with insects. Finding nothing, I sat cross-legged and looked up at the sky. A cloudy night, I could barely see the moon much less any stars. “Well... Kicked you out. I guess I probably could have stayed, but we both know how much Tina likes my company.”

“We were fighting.”

“No shit.”

“Bite me.” He took a long drag from his cigarette and let the smoke out in a long exaggerated exhale. As he finished, he made a fluttering sound with his lips.

“I hate it when you do that.”

“It relaxes me.” He started to pace and mutter under his breath.

I ignored him for a while. I had been laid off of work two days earlier, so I didn’t have anywhere to be. I probably should have spent the weekend scanning the want ads or writing a resume, but the truth was that I didn’t know how to write one. I guess Steve could have helped

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me. He was the one with the home and the career and the long term girlfriend. He knew all about resumes and acronyms that related to how much money was in your retirement fund. I knew about tattoos and dead end jobs and... I started to laugh.

“What’s so funny?”

“Do you remember that time when we were throwing snowballs at cars on the bridge?”

“Which time? And which bridge?”

“The bridge on Bridge Avenue and the time when I hit the Oldsmobile and busted the taillight, but it was a cop on his way home from work, and he pulled over and jumped out and came running after us.”

“Yeah, and when he told us to come out of the bushes, you put your hands in the air like some dumbass in a cop and robber movie.” Steve finished his cigarette and flicked it off into the middle of the street. “You always were a cop magnet. How many times have you been arrested?”

“Three.”

“Come on, I’ve bailed you out way more times than three. I think your memory is starting to go.”

“The times they drop the charges don’t count,” I said.

“Sure they don’t,” Steve said.

The glow of headlights started to come over the hill. Steve shuffled a few steps toward the oncoming car, and I stood up and brushed off my pants.

“Shit,” Steve said. “It’s a van. She’s not in a van.”

The van slowed and the driver, a man with graying hair, lowered his window and asked Steve if he’d seen two boys on bicycles.

“No,” Steve told him.

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The driver raised his window and drove off.

“You could have asked for a ride.”

“He didn’t give me a chance,” Steve said and went back to pacing.

“You could have asked him where we were. Maybe we should call someone.”

“What are we going to tell them? That we’re on some dark road in Jackson. Who the hell lives in Jackson anyway?”

“Geoff and his wife, Tammy,” I said.

“You’re an asshole,” he said.

“Now that’s just not nice.” I sat back down and looked up at the sky again. I still couldn’t see the moon, and it annoyed me. “Maybe you should call Tina.”

“Hell no. That’s what she wants.” Steve pulled out his cell phone and fiddled with it.

“What did you get fired for?”

“I got laid off.”

“Whatever. What for?”

“Didn’t say. Just said he couldn’t use me anymore. I’m not in mourning over it or anything.” I patted my pockets a few times looking for my cigarettes before realizing that Steve still had them. “You know she could have at least dropped us off at a diner or something. That food was horrible tonight, and now I’m starving. Throw me my cigarettes, will ya?”

“Flyers won.” Steve peered at the screen of his phone.

“I’m not Canadian. I don’t give a shit about hockey. Now throw me my cigarettes.”

Still looking at his phone, Steve sat down on the ground next to me and handed me the pack.

“What the hell are you doing?”

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“Checking the scores.”

“Still? Do something useful. Like call a taxi.”

“She’ll be back.”

“Why did she kick us out anyway?” I looked at the cigarettes in my hand, changed my mind, and placed them on the ground.

“Weren’t you listening?”

“I was blocking you guys out.”

“We were fighting about that time she slept with Geoff.”

“That was twelve years ago. She was so drunk she probably thought it was you, and I already punched Geoff for that.”

“That was just an excuse to fight. She’s wants to get married and have kids.”

“So get married,” I said.

“You sound like my mother.”

“You’ve been with her for fourteen years. What’s the difference?”

“I just don’t understand why we need to get a piece of paper to say we’re together. I don’t need the approval of a judge or even worse some child molesting priest. Do you remember when that guy was skimming off of the collection plate at church to pay for hookers? And now I’m supposed to get married in that church? Really?”

“So get married in a different church.”

“That’s not the point.” He looked at me. “I thought at least you, Mr. Punk Rock, would understand me on this one.”

“At least have some kids.”

“She won’t have kids unless we’re married. She said her father wouldn’t approve.”

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“He’s been dead for ten years.”

“That’s what I said and boy did she get pissed.”

Headlights appeared again but from the opposite direction of the hill. A dark colored sedan pulled up and stopped in front of us. The passenger side window lowered, and Steve and I stood up.

“Are you guys just enjoying the night or did you break down somewhere?” The driver looked to be our age, and his brown hair was cut close to the scalp like a military cut.

“His girl kicked us out of the car.” I pointed at Steve with my thumb.

“Oh man, I’ve been there,” he said. “I can give you a ride if you want. There’s a 24 hour diner on route 9 where I can drop you.”

“Hell, yeah,” Steve said and opened the front passenger door.

I opened the back door and climbed into the car. The backseat smelled like rubbing alcohol and there was a black garbage bag with a white rope sticking out of it on the floor.

He introduced himself as Dale. He told us that he was driving home to Linden.

Steve asked if he was a military guy.

“The hair gives it away, huh? I did two tours in Iraq,” he said. “Man I tell you what, that country is a damn cesspool. The newspapers can say what they want. I never have seen so much crap in my life. People talk about Newark and Camden. Screw those towns man. Go to Iraq if you want to see some shit.”

“I’ll pass,” Steve said.

Dale chuckled and said maybe he should have passed too.

As we came over the hill, we could see flashing police lights in the distance.

“I didn’t hear any accidents,” I said.

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“Looks like a road block,” Dale said.

A police officer flagged us down. He looked tired and barely old enough to shave. He asked Dale where he was going.

“Just heading to the diner on Route 9,” Dale said.

The cop asked him if he had seen two boys on bicycles.

“Nope,” Dale said and looked at me and Steve.

I asked if they had been missing long.

The cop looked around and leaned close to the window. “It’s the police chief’s son and one of his friends. Probably nothing, but they disappeared this morning and their cell phones are off, so he’s worried. So keep an eye out as you’re driving, ok?” Then he stepped back and waved us through.

“Hope those kids are all right,” Steve said.

“I’m sure they’re fine,” Dale said. “Probably getting drunk in a field somewhere. You know how kids are. Anybody got a cigarette?”

“I do.” I checked my pockets then cursed silently to myself. “Damn. I left them where I was sitting.”

“I shouldn’t smoke anyway. Bad for your health.”

“That’s why I quit,” Steve said. “Own a house Dale? Veterans are getting great rates on mortgages these days.”

“No, I’m not much into growing roots.”

“Great opportunity to buy right now.”

“Not really my style,” Dale said.

“To each his own right?” Steve turned his attention back to the scores on his phone.

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Dale became quiet. Tapping his fingers on the steering wheel, he leaned forward as he drove as if he was having a hard time seeing. His breathing was methodical and even.

I sat in the back seat and wondered why the car smelled like it did and what a guy from Linden was doing passing through central Jersey and why Dale told the cop he was going to the diner instead of home, instead of to Linden.

When he dropped us off, Dale barely looked at us. As soon as we closed the doors he accelerated and pulled away without even waving.

“I think we should call the cops,” I told Steve as Dale pulled onto Route 9 and headed north.

“The cops don’t give rides home anymore. Besides they’re probably busy looking for those boys.”

“I think that guy did something to them. Did you smell that car? It smelled like it had been recently cleaned with alcohol.”

“So what? Is it illegal to have a clean car?”

“And there was a garbage bag in the back with a rope sticking out of it.”

“You heard that cop. Those kids are probably home already. Come on. Let’s get something to eat. Tina will call soon wondering where we are. It serves her right for leaving us on the side of the road like that. Wait until she sees that roadblock. She’s going to have a heart attack.”

“I don’t know man. I think we should call the cops.”

“Then call them.”

“My phone’s shut off,” I said. “I couldn’t pay the bill.”

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Steve chuckled and told me not to worry. Besides, he said, would a child killer stop and give two stranded guys a ride. He told me that he wanted to see if his advertisement was on the placemats inside like it was supposed to be. Turning he climbed the steps and walked into the diner.

After a few seconds, I followed him.

They found the boys the next day. Eight years old and nine years old and dead. Tied together with white rope. A half empty bottle of alcohol was next to them. They had both been strangled. When the toxicology reports came back, it said both boys had been drugged with a sedative.

Within a week, a registered sex offender who lived half a mile from the scene was arrested. He had long scraggly hair and a history of drug and alcohol abuse. He claimed he had been alone in his mother's house the whole night, but his mother was out of town so no one could verify his story.

The police declared the case closed even though there was no physical evidence recovered from the scene. The police chief, the man with graying hair who had driven by Steve and me in the van, broke down during the news conference.

I wondered about Dale, our Good Samaritan. I brought it up with Steve a few days later while we were in his kitchen. Steve was putting beer into a cooler while I made sandwiches for a fishing trip.

"They got the guy," Steve said.

"Got what guy? They have no evidence tying that guy to the scene. He could be innocent."

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“He ain’t innocent,” Steve said. “He’s already done time for molestation.”

“Just because he did something before doesn’t mean he did this one.”

“Look, I know you’re hooked on this strange north Jersey drifter story, but it’s a lot more likely that the freak child molester down the street did it. You need to stop watching that Mystery TV channel.”

Tina walked into the kitchen and asked what we were talking about.

“Nothing,” Steve said.

A month later, Steve bought Tina an engagement ring. He told me he was being stupid. He told me he was just resisting the natural flow of life, and he asked me to be his best man.

“Can I wear sneakers with my tux?” I asked.

Steve chuckled and told me that best men weren’t allowed to place conditions.

“You know I hate tuxedos,” I said.

“Fine,” Steve said. “You can wear sneakers.”

A few months after that, two boys were murdered in a field in Sparta. Same white rope. Same alcohol laced with the same drug.

The newspapers called it a copycat killer. The lawyer for the scraggly haired child molester claimed it was proof that his client was innocent, but nobody was listening to him.

“Did you see the news about those kids in Sparta?” I asked Steve. “They died the same way those kids in Jackson did.”

“No. I missed it,” he said.

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We were standing in his backyard. Steve was practicing swinging a 9 iron. Setting up for the swing, he rocked his hips back and forth and then pulled the club back until it was over his head before coming back forward. The motion had no fluidity, a mess of uncoordinated body parts. Again and again, he swung. Most of the time, he slammed the club head into the grass and dirt flew into the air.

“You’re full of it. All you do is read the news.”

“Then what the hell did you ask me for?”

“Why do you own a golf club? You don’t even play golf.”

“It relaxes me,” Steve said. Looking back down at the ground, Steve focused on the club head resting a foot in front of his feet and restarted the process of swinging.

“Where’s Tina?”

“Off with her Mother looking at wedding dresses. I’m not looking forward to that credit card statement. She made me raise the dress budget in retaliation for your sneakers.” Steve stepped back from his stance and looked up at me. “You’re breaking my concentration.”

“You don’t even have a ball!”

“That’s not the point. It’s a form of meditation. I’m focusing on an act so I’m here in the present and not worried about all that other stuff we cloud our mind with.”

“What television show is that crap from? Let me guess, they sold you that club, right? Is it a special meditation club?”

“Piss off,” Steve said. Turning he grabbed a can of beer from a table behind him.

“Seriously though, don’t you think it’s strange about that guy? I mean he claimed to be from Linden for Christ’s sake. What the hell was he doing in Jackson?”

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“You’re like a dog with a bone sometimes. Too bad you’re not this fixated on gainful employment,” Steve said.

“But he gave us his name,” I said.

“If he is actually a child molesting killer, do you really think he gave us his real name?”

I told him that we should call the cops.

“Go ahead. Call the cops. But if you call them, it’ll look bad on us. First, how many months has it been? Second, what the hell are we going to tell them? Some guy with a crew cut gave us a ride. Could you even pick the guy out of a lineup? Because I don’t think that I could,” he said. “For all we know, we could end up making the cops chase after innocent people. Let the cops do what they’re trained to do. Leave it alone.”

Three months later they found a boy in the Jersey Pine Barrens. Same deal. Same white rope. Same kind of alcohol laced with the same drug.

I brought it up with Steve the next day. We were in his kitchen. He had just bought a new juicer and was demonstrating it for me. It was black and sleek and efficient. The sliced fruit went in the top and came out the bottom as juice in a matter of seconds.

“What do you think?” He stood aside, one hand on the kitchen counter, the other hand pointing at the juicer.

“I’m not from California. If I want fruit juice, I buy it at the store like every other guy around here.”

“But that stuff is full of crap. It’s processed. It’s not the same.” He held up a glass of something that looked like a cross between industrial sludge and moss. “Try it.”

“I’ll stick to beer.”

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“You’re hopeless.” He took a sip and tried to look like it tasted good, but I could tell he was full of shit. After forcing it down, he said, “It’s really healthy. Can’t live on cigarette, beer, and subs forever.”

“Did you see the news?”

“Nope,” Steve said and turned away from me to fiddle with his new machine.

“They found another dead kid.”

“World is full of sick fucks, ain’t it?”

“We got to go to the cops, Steve. We can’t keep quiet anymore.”

“Still got yourself convinced that the dude in the car is the evil mastermind, huh?” He had his juicer taken apart and was rinsing the components off in the sink.

“Seriously? Kids are dying. We have to call.”

“So call. Not that it’ll do any good. It’s still probably not him. Like I said before, what freak child molester picks up hitchhikers? And I can’t even remember the guy’s name.”

“Dale.”

“Yeah, right, because I’m sure the guy gave us his real name.”

“But he had a white rope in the back of the car. Just like all these killings.”

“Sure, because white rope is so rare.” Steve finished washing off his juicer and was laying the pieces on a towel to dry next to his sink. “Even if it is him, we don’t have a license plate number, nothing. I can’t even remember what kind of car he was driving.”

“It was a black four door sedan. Late model. Sometime in the early 2000s.”

“Great, they’ll be pulling over Grandmas from here to Atlantic City.”

“That’s not the point.”

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“And what do you think is going to happen if you call in. Maybe you’re right. Maybe it is him. Maybe he was actually stupid enough to pick up hitchhikers and to give us his real name. How long ago was this? How many kids are dead? What’s going to happen to us Jimmy? You think we’re going to be fucking heroes? You think that we’re going to get invited onto TV? Maybe get a parade? Well, we’re not. We’re going to get slaughtered. Over a million people live in Ocean and Monmouth Counties, but every single one of them lives in a small town, and you know how small town people are. Everybody knows everybody, and they all talk shit. They’ll shred us. Yeah, yeah, how could we have known, who’d a thunk it, yada yada yada, bullshit. You got tattoos from head to toe, but you ain’t stupid. You know how the newspapers are. Complex stories don’t sell papers. Getting people pissed off does. If we go to the police station, I’ll never sell a house again in this state. Are you kidding me? I’ll be the guy who let a child molester go. It won’t matter that I had no reason to distrust this guy. That any sane person wouldn’t expect a child molester to stop and pick people up from the side of the road. I got my face plastered all over the place. Benches. Buses. Fucking Diner placemats. Tina’s pregnant, finally. I’m getting married in two months. Seriously? Maybe you can disappear back into the shadows. Maybe people will look at you and shake their heads and make comments about misguided youth, but not me. I’ll be fucked.”

“I could call it in from a pay phone. Anonymously.”

“Go ahead. Not that it’ll matter. What are they going to do? Get a warrant off of an anonymous phone call. Follow him around all the time. Not likely.” Steve waved his hand at me and turned around to look out the window above his sink. “Do whatever you want, but don’t bring me in, Jimmy. I have a family to think about. Responsibilities.”

Tina walked into the kitchen and asked what we were talking about.

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“Nothing,” Steve said.

“Nothing... Nothing... Whenever I ask, you two are always talking about nothing. And you,” she raised her hand and pointed a finger at me “are you really planning on wearing sneakers to my wedding?”

“Nope, I’m wearing flip flops,” I said.

I found a job in a warehouse sorting boxes. On the way to work, I had to drive by the Parkway exit for Linden so I spent most of my days thinking about Dale. A couple nights a week, I started cruising around Linden looking for him. I don’t know what I would have done if I had found him, but I felt like I should be doing something. I saw rows of small houses with beat up old cars parked out front and teenaged black boys astride bicycles but no Dale.

At night I’d lay awake and replay our fifteen minute car ride over and over. I’d think about how Dale tapped his fingernails against the steering wheel and breathed so even. I wondered how a person could do that. Could kill and then be so calm afterwards.

I knew that Steve was right and wrong all at the same time. Dale had probably lied about everything, had probably already ditched the car, but still... Even if it was all a waste of time, how could we just do nothing?

The next month they found two boys in a field outside of Cherry Hill. Same deal. Same white rope. Same alcohol laced with the same drug.

I didn’t bring it up with Steve this time. I knew what he was going to say. Instead I pulled off the parkway in Linden on my way home from work and found a payphone. It was next to a one story bar with beer signs in the windows and a big old fashioned wooden door. On

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the corner were a couple of guys standing around in big jackets drinking from beer bottles in brown paper bags. It was a quiet street. At least at that time. Not too many cars. It was the kind of corner that I could get in a lot of trouble in. It felt like the right spot to call from.

A number had been played on the evening news. A 1 800 number. I didn't even need a quarter. So I dialed and heard a recording and then a beep. I said, "I have reason to believe that an individual named Dale of Linden, New Jersey is responsible for the killings." I had my hand on the lever and started to push it down then stopped myself and continued, "He's of average height and build and an ex-military guy. He did two tours in Iraq. At least he said so. When I saw him in Jackson, he had a crew cut. He drives a dark late model sedan." And then I hung up. I ran the message over and over in my head, but I couldn't think of anything else to add, nor could I see how it was really going to help, this anonymous message, left on a machine, and it hit me that Steve was right. It wasn't about helping out kids. That chance was long gone. It was about feeling better about myself. Not all that noble a goal, really.

I turned around, and the guys on the corner were watching me in the way that guys do when they're sizing someone up, wondering what's in his wallet, and thinking about making him a target. Someone made a decision, and the three of them came at me, spread out along the sidewalk, not giving me room to run. So I punched the first one that got close, and it was all a blur after that. A cop must have been passing by because he got there quick. I was on top of one of them. Someone had been hitting me from behind but had fallen away. I was thinking that I had to turn quick because that guy would be back soon.

Then the cop hit me. A nightstick hitting your back feels a lot different from a fist.

Steve bailed me out. He always had before. Probably always would. That had always been his role.

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“What the hell happened?” He asked me as we drove to pick up my car.

“I got jumped.” I leaned back into the car seat. My back was sore where the cop had hit me, and my knuckles were sore from punching the guys who had come at me, but other than that I didn’t feel much worse for wear.

“So if you got jumped, what the hell did they arrest you for?” Steve looked over at me, smiled, and looked back at the road.

“I was winning. They always arrest the guy on top.”

“You have to stop getting in these street fights. You’re not a teenager anymore. Somebody is going to have a gun one of these days.” Steve was shaking his head. It was a lecture he had given me many times before, but he didn’t really mean it. It just felt good for him to say it. “And what the hell were you doing in Linden anyway?”

“Making a call,” I said.

“You had to go to Linden to make a call?”

“I called that hotline. Told them about Dale. I used a payphone. So it shouldn’t come back to us.” I rolled down the window a little bit. It was cold outside, and the wind hitting my face felt good. I had always preferred cold to heat.

“Brilliant, you call from a pay phone that they can trace and then get arrested next to it. Which puts you there. If they want, now they can find you.”

“I’m more worried about them finding Dale.”

“We don’t even know if it’s him.” Steve smacked the steering wheel.

“Don’t we?”

“Look, I hope you feel better about yourself. I hope you feel like you did your duty and all that,” Steve said and looked over at me. We were stopped at a red light, and Steve took his

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hand off the steering wheel and pointed a finger at me. “But you know that I’ve always been there for you. Always. Ever since we were too fucking short to ride on the big kid rides at Great Adventure. Don’t hang me out to dry on this.”

“Is that all you care about?”

“If we knew for sure, I would guide the police there myself. I’d draw them a fucking map and hold their hand as we walked up to the guy’s front door. But we don’t know for sure, and we had no damn reason to believe anything that first night or the nights after. They arrested someone for Christ’s sake, but nobody and I mean nobody is going to care about that. They’ll just lay it all on us.”

Behind us a car honked, and Steve looked up at the now changed light and then accelerated.

“We had no reason to think anything, Jimmy. No damn reason. But people aren’t going to care. They’ll just want to judge and feel superior, and we’ll be fucked, and my fucking will be substantially worse than yours because I got a lot more to lose.”

Two weeks later Dale struck again down in the southwestern part of New Jersey. The police caught him this time. A State Trooper pulled him over on the Turnpike for a busted taillight and searched his car. In the backseat, he found the garbage bag with a coil of white rope, sedatives, a condom, and gloves. Dale led the police to a field where another boy was dead.

His picture was all over the television. He looked just like I remembered except he was wearing glasses, and the next day his name was in every newspaper article, Dale, just like he had told us. When I went to Steve’s that day, the newspaper was sitting on the counter.

“See,” Steve said. “They caught him just fine.”

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“Just fine?” I said.

“Yeah, and now you can let it go. The guy’s caught. The world is safe again, except for the other million sick fuckers in the world.” Steve turned around and picked a piece of paper off his kitchen counter. “Did you get a chance to see the menu for the wedding reception? It’s going to be sick.”

The wedding was on a Saturday. A sunny, warm spring day. One of those days when flowers are sprouting, and trees are that fresh green they get before the summer heat dries them out. At least that’s what I was told. I spent the day in a little bar frequented by commercial fisherman down by the docks. It was dark in there, and it smelled of cigarettes and beer and pool chalk. No flowers anywhere, and nobody gave a shit that I was wearing sneakers.

My cellphone buzzed almost non-stop for a good hour, but I didn’t even pull it out of my pocket.

“It pays good,” one of the fisherman, a skinny guy a little shorter than me with tattoos peeking out of the collar of his shirt and his sleeves, was trying to recruit me to work with him. “But it’s dangerous and hard. Cold as hell out there. Windier than shit.”

“Is it a job or a punishment?”

“Maybe a little bit of both,” he said. “But there ain’t nobody but the other guys on the boat for miles and miles. Just water and clouds and sky for as far as the eye can see.”

“No roads? No cars? No people? Sounds like heaven to me,” I said.