

The First Day

I hadn't driven that little Nissan for almost five years but it ran nice. My brother kept it for me while I was away. She got the big Ford SUV and it was a good car, all right, but nothing I wanted. The little Nissan was economical and never caused any trouble.

An hour after sunset I parked between two big trucks and walked slowly through the entrance. The greeter, an old woman, had her back turned. I grabbed a cart even though I didn't need one. Push a cart, you're invisible. I walked past the dairy counter, then the meat. Same old brands, hardly a change anywhere.

A teenaged girl in a tight red sweater and jeans that might as well have been skin threw her big, brown eyes at me, and I raised from the deep that old way of thinking, not like a memory but like something I read somewhere. It's easy to get into trouble with young women. Say, "Hello, there," and you're in trouble.

The girl returned to her mother, six inches shorter, thirty pounds heavier, but they shared the same springy, black hair. The mother glanced at me almost in sympathy, then wearily contemplated her daughter, who held high her frozen chicken, twirling it in rhythm with her swaying hips like she was some fancy model on a runway. The girl reached her mother's cart and turned for a final, fulsome glance my way—or I supposed so. I had already grabbed my package of salami and headed for the exit.

I walked between the pallets of rock and dirt, slipped past Automotive, and found a path in the field behind. The moon scuttled under dark clouds and I felt the tug of wind from the north. Rain, I thought, but not yet.

I weaved around piles of asphalt slag and busted-up lumber, then dodged a campfire where a homeless person sat on a ruined couch, smoking. I reached the drainage ditch behind the

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row of houses. Coming this way, I didn't need to walk down the street, causing neighbors to wonder about the strange man out there in the dark, maybe even recognizing me from the old days. Those neighbors of mine would call 911 if you spat on the walk.

The wind blew stronger in my face. Dogs couldn't smell me.

Pete and Maggie Yates, if that was who still lived there, raised chickens now. The birds had settled for the night into a collective murmur, but one hen clucked nervously as I passed.

She'd put up a privacy fence so I went down to the drainage ditch and brought up old tires to make steps. Just as I slid into the yard, lightning flashed, and twenty feet to the east I spotted a gate. All right, I thought, story of my life. But the gate made it simple to leave.

The moon darted half out of the clouds again and I reached the storage shed in a few steps. The latch was rusty and squeaked some before I could make it work. A light came on in the bedroom and I panicked, but then I heard the faint whoosh of the toilet and realized the light was a coincidence.

No one had entered the shed since I went away. Lightning flashed again but I didn't need to see. I reached above the workbench and found my grandfather's hand saw. It was a Disston saw with an apple wood handle. Five inset, ornate screws. Swedish steel. Nobody's made a saw like that in fifty years.

Up there, they had me building handy little stools they put around everywhere. I took pride in my work, but when you came to the trim, there wasn't a decent saw in the entire place. It always made me think of Grandpa's beautiful old Disston.

Why would she care about the saw? She wouldn't. She took out that restraining order but the saw wouldn't matter. A person stops caring after a while. You forget what it was all about.

She'd care about Lucky, though.

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I unfolded a lawn chair and sat in the opening, waiting. He'd figure it out pretty soon just from the little sounds a human can't hear.

I could see over the deck and through those glass doors right into the kitchen. I thought she'd have taken up with a man by now but it didn't seem so. She walked around in that same old green housecoat and her hair was a mess. Just like me, she wasn't getting any younger.

She spread peanut butter on dark bread and came toward the deck, munching slowly as if in deep thought. I sat directly in front of her, fifty feet away, and didn't move. She slid open the door and held one hand high, feeling for rain. She returned to the kitchen, drew a glass of water, and slouched off to bed again. No TV, that woman. She always hated TV.

I heard a thump as he jumped off the bed and hit the floor. Old fellow, almost twelve now. I got him when he was a pup.

He walked through that dog door I had so much trouble installing and came steadily across the deck, barking once. "Hush," I whispered, and he dropped to the grass and slid forward on his belly. I gave him a slice of salami just as the rain began. We'd get soaked but I had towels and blankets in that little Nissan. I figured we could make Tulsa.

"C'mon, Lucky," I said. "Let's go."