

approximately 3600 words

FEAR

by Bax

"Nice ass."

She twirls around her glow-in-the-dark white body, barely covered by a black bikini, and her flying out shoulder-length blonde hair. "Wanna dance?" she asks.

"Nah, I'm too old for that stuff."

She smiles. "You don't have to do anything but sit. I do all the work."

"I mean I'm so old I might have a heart attack."

"Sure," she quips derisively.

"Anyway, I need to go outside for a smoke."

I walk away, push through the swinging doors to a short, dark hallway and then turn the knob on the heavy metal door to the outside.

A grey limo, like a whale out of water, stretches across the No Parking zone about thirty feet from the entrance. Both doors on this side of the main compartment are spread open, exposing a plush grey interior with two six packs of Bud on the floor, the legs of a guy and a girl in the back seat and those of a guy facing them.

My pool buddy, George, stands off to the side smoking. There's no cover charge at the Wild Goose and he is recently retired so he spends most of his evenings here, picking up free beers from chumps like me and some serious cash from guys who think they are pool sharks. Black as an eight ball, with a trim figure and his black hair greying at the temples, he contrasts with my mid-fifties cue ball whiteness, prominent paunch and bald head. He doesn't seem to notice that there are a lot of girls walking around in very abbreviated outfits, while I, despite what I said to the blonde with the nice ass, am an easy mark for the girls and my factory job doesn't pay me enough to spend a lot of time here.

"What's going on?" I ask.

He smiles, "They seem to be looking for some girls."

A white clean shaven man in his early forties wearing dress shoes, grey slacks and a crisp white dress shirt walks over to us from the limo. "You guys know any of the girls inside?"

George stares at the guy, making clear that he thinks this an impertinent question. He steps out his cigarette, "Scuze me" and walks back inside.

"I know a few," I say.

He shakes my hand. "I'm Paul. I'm directing a film and need some actresses. Do you think you could talk a couple of them into coming with us?"

*Hey, this may be Los Angeles but it ain't Hollywood.*

"Fat chance of that. They escort these girls into the building and back to their cars when they're done. None of them are going to get into a strange car."

"They can drive their own car and follow us."

"It's not gonna happen."

He grunts. "Hey, wanna beer?"

"Sure."

"Get him a beer," he barks to the limo.

The legs of the guy in the back seat become a big chubby Hispanic guy with a round face and a put-upon manner who stoops forward. He wears a faded light blue dress shirt tucked in and hanging over his belt, Fila tennis shoes and a small towel hanging from a rear pocket of his tan pants. Mid-twenties. He pulls a Bud from its plastic sleeve, and I step forward to accept it. I now see the white girl in the back seat, wearing a red dress and black heels. Short and thin, with a nice figure, she has on thick makeup to hide what is clearly not a great complexion. I also get a clear view of the tall, handsome guy with thick blond hair combed back sitting opposite them. The director points to him: "This is Ray Faldo. He's been in six episodes of Days of Our Lives." Ray stoops to get out of the limo and steps forward to shake my hand.

"They kill you off?"

"Nah, they just kinda forgot about me."

The director asks me, "You want to come with us? You want to be in the movie?"

"Can I ask George if he wants to go along?"

"Sure. Who's George?"

"The black guy I was talking to."

"Okay."

Back inside, I pause to let my eyes adjust to the dim light. I walk alongside the bar and see George on his stool at the end of it, next to the pool table, drinking a Coors. "Wanna go watch 'em make a movie?"

"Nah, that group looks kinda shaky to me. Besides, I just started this beer."

"Ah, come on, bring it with you. what the hell, it might be fun."

"No thanks. You stay safe."

As I come back out, a good looking, muscular young Hispanic guy in camouflage pants and a grey sweat shirt strides past me. "No deal. You never saw such a stuck up bunch a bitches."

The director barks, "Let's go." Ray and the muscular Hispanic get in. The director turns to me, "You coming?"

"I'll drive my car and follow."

He says "Okay. It's not far."

The limo slowly backs out of its No Parking place. I get in my shiny two-week-old 2000 black Camry, named Black

Beauty, and move in behind it. The lights cooperate and I keep the limo in sight.

*I don't mind if I lose them. Maybe George is right; I don't need to be doing this.*

We drive about twenty minutes, into Santa Monica. I get stopped twice by red lights but they get stopped at the next ones so it's easy for me to catch up.

*Something wants me to do this. Maybe they'll have a part for a bald-headed guy with a paunch.*

The limo pulls into an alley with a sharp uphill grade. I know we are near the ocean because I can smell the seaweed and stranded shellfish and there is often a raised area like the one producing this grade about a quarter of a mile in from the shore. They park and I pull in ten feet behind the limo. Except for the driver, they all get out and walk up some stairs with a metal railing. Paul unlocks the sliding glass door and they walk into the back of a second floor apartment. No one says anything to me or even seems to notice me so I stay in the car. After about ten minutes, the two Hispanics, the big chubby one and the muscular one, and the girl come out and walk down the steps. By now I am standing and leaning against Black Beauty.

Muscles sees me. "We're goin' for a walk."

"Gotcha."

*At least someone recognized me.*

The girl seems a reluctant participant. She gives me a timid smile despite her apparent uneasiness as they walk by. They head down the alley and around the hedge at the base of it.

A few minutes later the director and Ray "Days of Our Lives" Faldo come out. The director locks the sliding glass door and they come down the steps and into the limo. They pay no attention to me and take off up the alley. As they drive off, the two Hispanics and the girl walk into the base of the alley. The muscular one yells, "Hey, what about us!"

The limo continues up the alley.

Muscles grabs the girl by the arm and walks quickly back into the street, the girl tripping over her heels as she frantically tries to keep up.

*I guess he's hoping to flag down the limo if it comes that way.*

I've had enough so I get in the car and back out of the alley into the street. I see the two Hispanics standing in front of the girl, Muscles pushing her against a parked car with his forearm across her throat. I back up until I am about five feet from them, open the window on the passenger side and ask, "Miss, do you need a ride?"

Muscles, his handsome face contorted in anger, takes quick strides toward my car, reaches in, opens the door, slides into the seat, turns the key off and pulls it out of the ignition. "Get out."

*What the hell! Who does he think he is! But I'm not messing with him cause he could mess me up bad.*

I get out. He also gets out, comes around, gets in the driver's seat, peels forward, jerks to a stop, peels backwards, scrapes the rear hubcap on the curb with a loud screech as he parks and gets out. "Over here by the fence, both of you. Kneel down, facing the fence."

*Oh my god, get me out of this alive.*

Chubby grabs the girl's arm and pushes her toward the fence. She places her hand on his and pleads, "You're hurting my arm."

He says, "Shut up and kneel."

I kneel down beside her.



*What an idiot I am! Why didn't I just take off! Why didn't I pick up on what George was trying to tell me!*

Muscles turns to Chubby, "Watch 'em. I'll see if Paul at least left the apartment open."

*I saw Paul lock it but I'm not saying anything. Muscles would probably take it out on me.*

The girl whispers in her timid voice, "Sorry I got you into this. Do what they say."

Chubby barks, "No talking."

Muscles returns. "The bastard."

He paces behind us, repeatedly slamming his right fist into his left hand. "Fuck. What the hell are we supposed to do? Somebody's going to pay for this."

Chubby, standing beside the girl, tries to console him. "Aw, they'll be back."

"No they won't. They'll spend the whole fuckin night looking for some fuckin girls, which ain't gonna happen. We're screwed."

He moves in behind me and slams his fist hard into the wooden fence just above my head.

*This guy's a masochist. And dangerous. I'm glad it wasn't my face hitting that board.*

He just rubs his knuckles and, standing to the side of me, points something in his sweatshirt pocket at my head.

*It's probably just his finger but it could be a gun or the blunt end of a switchblade.*

"I'm not afraid to use this. I'm wanted for so many things one more won't make any difference. I could blow both your brains out. Wouldn't bother me a bit."

*I believe that.*

The girl starts to cry. "Please don't hurt me."

He paces again. "At least we've got a car. We can get home."

*My car! If you take it, how are we going to get home?*

A white cop car with a blue diagonal stripe across the side and POLICE in gold letters across the doors slows and stops. It is about thirty feet away. The spotlight shines on us and we hear the window roll down.

"What's going on here," growls the cop.

Muscles stoops and whispers to me, "Say anything and I'll cut your balls off." He turns to the girl. "Stop crying." She stiffens and he walks over to the cop car and we can hear them talking but not what they say. They even chuckle at one point.

*Surely the cop will walk over here to investigate.*

*Why would two people be kneeling in front of a fence?*

The cop car pulls away.

*Stupid cop.*

The girl begins to shake visibly and I'm not doing so well either.

Muscles comes back. "That was fuckin close. Let's get outta here."

He gives me the keys. "Don't try anything stupid. Just drive the speed limit and stop at the red lights." He gets in the passenger side. Chubby grabs the girl's arm, pushes her into the back seat and gets in after her.

We drive around for half an hour. Muscles says to the back seat, "That fat broad you used to go with that lives around here. You think you can find her place?"

"Yeh, it's close. Take a right at the light, drive half a mile and look for Hudson Lane on the left. It's really just an alley."

We find it. It becomes very dark in the alley, which is paved but so narrow that the unkempt shrubs brush against both sides of the car like the claws of a hawk.

*Damn! Two weeks old and Black Beauty needs a paint job.*

When I get halfway up the alley, Chubby leans forward. "Stop here." He grunts as he lifts his big frame out of the back seat, walks up a few steps to the small porch of a dark grey house the size of a big shed. He tries the door but it's locked. He knocks on the door, waits ten seconds and then bangs on it. He pulls the small towel out of his back pocket, wraps it around his right fist, slams his fist through one of the small windows next to the door, reaches in and opens the door. He walks in but soon comes back out. "No one's here."

"See if you can find some cash."

Chubby goes back in.

Headlights appear at the top of the alley.

Muscles yells, "Get inna goddamn car. Quick."

Chubby leaves the door ajar, bounds down the steps and gets in the back seat. I begin to back out of the alley. "This ain't no fuckin picnic!" screams Muscles. He jams his left foot onto my right one on the accelerator. A telephone pole takes off the mirror on my side and scrapes the side of the car.

The girl yells, "We're going to crash!"

*What the hell! Stupid jerk! My new Camry! What was the big hurry? Just because someone was coming into the alley doesn't mean it was someone that lived in that house. It's good I didn't have my arm out the window. I'm sliced meat. Should have said something to that cop. That was my chance.*

Muscles takes his foot off mine. I back out the rest of the way as fast as I can without hitting anything else. I squeal to a stop on the main street and squeal again as I take off, slowing down after half a block. As I suspected, the car isn't following us.

"You didn't need that mirror," sneers Muscles. "You don't need this one either." He grabs the rearview mirror, pulls it off the windshield, and throws it out the window. "Just don't drive backwards."

Chubby chuckles.

Muscles commands, "Keep driving at the speed limit. Don't do anything that'd make somebody notice us."

*Okay, asshole, but already my new car is a piece of junk.*

We drive around Santa Monica and Culver City for an hour. It is 3 AM.

There is some scuffling in the back seat. The girl pleads to Chubby, "Please don't do that."

I screech to a stop and yell, "What's going on back there!" I try to look in the rearview mirror that isn't there anymore.

Muscles points his sweatshirt pocket at me. "Get moving." To the back seat he says, "Take it easy back there."

The girl says, "You don't want to mess with me. I've got a disease."

Chubby grunts but there are no more scuffling noises from the back seat.

We drive around some more. Every half hour we check the alley for the limo but it doesn't arrive. Muscles suggests robbing a convenience store.

*Oh swell, we'll probably total the car this time. Why doesn't he just shoot us and get it over with.*

Chubby groans. "Nah, I wanna go home. It's late and I'm tired."

After another hour of driving around and checking the alley, Muscles says, "Get onna 405 and head south. We're goin' to Long Beach."

Forty minutes later we are almost to Long Beach but I am running out of gas. "I need to get off and get some gas."

"Okay, but keep your fuckin mouth shut."

I see a sign for a Mobil station lit up, exit from the freeway, and pull in next to a pump.

"Remember, jackoff, just pay for the gas and keep your mouth shut."

"Okay."

*He should know by now that I wouldn't try anything. I let the cop slip by so why would I take a chance on saying something to a gas station attendant.*

I'm surprised that my scraped door opens. I fill her up and give a fifty to the ruffled-looking guy in the booth. He swipes the bill to see if it's counterfeit, sticks it in his cash drawer and gives me change. I get back in the car.

"Get back onna 405 and keep heading south. Get off at the third exit," says Muscles.

We drive the short distance and I get off. It is a residential part of Long Beach with one story, modest stucco houses in white, tan and salmon.

"Stop at this next intersection."

Chubby opens the door. "See ya later, boss." He slams the door shut. I don't look for a street sign. Muscles is watching me and I figure Chubby doesn't live at this intersection anyway.

"Get back onna 405. Head north," commands Muscles.

I get back on the freeway and drive for about five minutes.

"Take this next exit."

We are getting off in Carson, a bedroom community. The houses look the same as the ones in Long Beach. We stop at another intersection and Muscles opens the door. "Too bad about your shiny new car getting messed up."

*He sounds serious, even sympathetic. Seems to imply that it's my fault.*

He looks back at the girl. "Better get that disease checked out." He slams the door shut,

I pull away. Halfway down the block, I begin to shake. I stop, press my arms hard against the steering wheel and try to take deep breaths. When I calm down, I manage to haltingly say, "My god, we're alive. I almost can't believe it."



The girl is quiet so I look back to see if she has fainted. She is just sitting there shaking, with her arms folded tight against her chest. I take off. This time I checked the street signs but am so freaked out that a minute later I can't remember them.

I ask the girl, "Where do you live?"

"Venice," she replies in a quavering voice.

"That's close to where I live. I'm in Westchester."

I take the 405 north. She tells me which exit and then just sits there shaking and holding her arms. I try talking about how lucky we are to be alive but she makes no response so I just shut up and drive. Forty minutes later I get to the end of the exit ramp and she starts giving me directions. We stop in front of a red brick apartment building. I get someone's business card that I don't need out of my wallet and hand it and a pen to her.

"I'm not coming on to you. I'm married. But could you write down your name and address and phone number? For insurance. In case they need a witness." Pause.

*I don't blame her for being hesitant.*

"I won't give 'em anything unless they insist."

She puts the card on her knee and tries to steady her hand as she writes. Trembling, she gives me the card and pen. With a hand on the door latch, she squeaks, "Thanks. You've been real nice to me." She opens and shuts the car door and I watch as she walks unsteadily to the apartment building.

I arrive home at 7 a.m., exhausted and shaking. My cute, blond wife, in her bathrobe and slippers, gives me a stern look. "What happened? Where were you? I've been up half the night worrying about you. I finally called the cops half an hour ago."

I leave out the part about the strip joint and that a girl was involved but tell her about the carjacking, them busting into the little house, and driving around Santa Monica all night.

"What were you doing in Santa Monica?"

"These guys were making a movie and invited me to come along."

"At night?"

"It was about eleven but, yeh, it was really stupid."

"Well, I'm glad you're safe. Call the cops and I'll make you a sandwich. Then you better get some sleep. You look like somebody let all the air out."

I get a cop on the phone. He says that someone will stop by later in the day. I have to shove the ham sandwich into my mouth so I can take a bite. I then go to bed and fall quickly asleep.

The cop comes by a couple of hours later and Linda wakes me. She has changed into Saturday work around the house clothes. The cop looks at the car, shakes his head and asks a bunch of questions. I again leave out the strip joint and the girl but otherwise tell him what happened. He asks for particulars, such as street names. I remember Hudson Lane but say I was too nervous to notice anything like that. I don't want those guys coming after me when they would get out of jail. The cop says they can't do an investigation without some specific information and leaves.

I call the insurance company. They say it is a case of vandalism and there is no need for a witness. I get out the card with the girl's information. There is only a scrawl of a phone number that I can't read. No name or address.

I throw it in the wastebasket and go back to sleep.

