

Chasing the Fare

Chasing the fare was what Curtis was doing. He had to hustle these days and gamble with his time. Sitting still didn't pay the lease on the cab. Once, he was able to drive around downtown Portland and work would come to him. Not anymore. Now, he chased work. All the way out to where the wheat-grass grew waist-high. But the air here was clean, cedar-sweet and so he rolled down the window, slowed and tried to drink it in.

He pulled the Scion to the side of the road and allowed a truck to pass, a giant American flag hung from its tailgate and eclipsed the last smudge of sun that reminded Curtis of a cream-cicle he once dropped on the cement, the couple crows flying by the first ants eager to drown. The truck kicked up enough dirt that Travis coughed. He could taste the diesel in the back of his throat.

Where the fuck was the place anyway? The last mailbox, planted in a weed-snarled gulley, might have been a whole football field back and was probably derelict anyhow. Out this far, the mail was delivered in old station wagons with homemade postal signs scotch-taped to the back of their windows.

It must have been a joke. No one needed a cab all the way out there. Curtis pressed the dispatch button on his navigation tablet. The loading dots froze. He was too far away. Only twenty-five miles or so outside of the city and everything changed.

He thought about calling in, but what was the point? The lead didn't have a destination. The name could have been anything. The call was either a prank or some wet-brain hick trying to get to the nearest corner store. Either way, it wasn't worth it. He should have been more thorough. He usually was. He had to look out for himself because, who else would?

"Fuck." His own voice startled himself. It wasn't that far from the casino. He could post up there and wait. Sometimes, someone would have hit and need a ride back to their hotel in the city. But it was conspicuous, and...demeaning. He spit out the window. He would just head back to town. Fuck it. He'd get something to eat, park outside a hotel, wait on calls, maybe get one last trip out to the airport, or a dancer going to work.

Not another mailbox distance down the road and something, someone sprung from the brush. At first he thought it was an animal, or a nest of birds got rustled by a deer because it was just a sudden flash of fabrics and the crackle of branches snapping. He couldn't see her

legs but just a flash of off-white cloth and arms waving. It was a blouse she was wearing but, as she got closer, he could see it smeared with something dark.

She ran out into the road. He wasn't going fast, only twenty-five or so, yet she startled him enough that he pressed the brake so hard that the tires shrieked and slid sideways.

She recoiled in the headlight. Her hair was pressed to her head. As she stumbled closer, he could see there was a shadow, a dark shadow on her brown skin. She could have been anywhere from twenty to forty. Her whole body folded into itself.

"Please." She raised her palms. She flattened her hands and lowered them, in a plaintive motion. She made her way to the side of the car. "Please, I need a ride."

Admittedly, he wanted to drive away, to rid himself of this and every problem he'd ever had. But, he knew that he wouldn't be able to sleep if he did. She was alone with only mosquitos, crickets, ticks and...him, he wast here as well.

"Please, I just need to get...somewhere. Susan," she pointed to the call details on the tablet. "That's me. That's me."

"Are you sure?" He already regretted saying it, but it was instinctive to be defensive.

She searched up and down the road. Her arm shook when shewent to scratch her nose.

Curtis might have thought of The Green River Killer or Kemper or Gein but the first visualization that came to him was the closing scene fromThe Texas Chainsaw Massacre in which a woman flees from a deranged killer onto a country road in the first lights of morning. He had been watching too many movies like that, trying to scare himself into thinking less about other things.

"Are you fucking kidding me? I mean, yeah, I'm her. Wait, wait here." She scurried off to the gully.

Some of the other drivers carried a piece but that made Curtis uneasy. He'd never even held one, truth be told. He did take the car out of park. If he saw someone else, some bearded beserker-type, rise from the brush, he was out of there. He was not taking the bait. He'd heard stories. Too many stories and seen scars. This one from a knife, this from a man's teeth, this from knuckle, this from a hatchet. His benevolence only ran so deep.

She was out there pulling on anything for balance and nearly fell over backward. She stayed like that for a moment, as if waiting for his help which he didn't extend. Caution, was what he told himself. Don't wind up in bad situations. If he invited bad situations into his night, or, for that matter, his life, he could blame no one but himself.

She stood like she was shaking something off, bent down and picked something up; a backpack. She held it like it was a dog that had bit her and was now dead.

Reaching into the bag with one hand, she used her opposite shoulder to wipe at her mouth and then her nose. With her other hand she produced three crumpled bills and threw them into his lap through the window. "Please, start the fucking meter," she said.

"I wasn't sure you'd stop. Seemed like you were just gonna keep going."

"I gotta look out for myself. First rule I've got." He wondered if she would believe him and further, wondered why he cared. "Where are you going again?" He had the car moving at a creep and he'd have to turn in one direction or another onto an actual paved, two-way road ahead. "I can plug it into my phone here."

"That phone yours?"

"One of the only things that is." A silent pause later he asked. "Are you okay?"

Her face seemed shifted to one side, like it got caught in a storm and was about to come loose from its foundation. "Yeah. I guess I look pretty terrible. Can hardly blame you for being careful. I had to look you over too. Saw you go past. Figured, can't be worse than what I've been dealing with." She cradled the bag in her lap.

He idled at a stop sign, figuring she might suggest a direction.

"How far is it to Spokane?" She finally said.

"Too far," he said. "And too much money."

"Thought that might be the case. I don't want Portland and definitely not Vancouver. I have to get somewhere else."

"A hospital maybe?"

She sighed. "Do I look like I need a hospital?"

He didn't say anything. In the distance a pair of headlights swelled in the trees.

"No hospital. Just drive, please. I need, a store. Like, Walmart or something like that. But, for now. Just drive. North, West, someplace."

He turned left, toward the freeway. She breathed hard.

"I've taken worse," she said once the lights behind them had dimmed and faded. She brushed her face. "This isn't shit."

"That your blood?" He didn't want to ask, or know for that matter but she might be injured and in shock.

"If it gets on the seats, I'll pay."

"Not what I meant." But, partially, it was. Whatever mess he made in the night, he'd have to clean up in the morning for the day driver.

"Do you really want to know?"

He hesitated. "Sure."

"Doesn't sound like it. Better you don't anyway."

"Hey look, what you say in here, stays in here. Think of it like confession."

"I'm not Catholic. That sort of shit never did nothing for me."

"Think of it like a bar then."

She rolled down her window a couple inches and took a breath. "I shot my old man. In the TV room. Right through the gut. Piece of buckshot went right through him and blew out the screen on the TV. He was watching the A-Team.

"He'd been up for two days and just found out the guy who was coming by with the Oxy burned him. He traded speed for Oxy. Without that, he couldn't handle the comedown. I knew it was coming and the shotgun was right there by the door that he knocked me into. If he was up another day, it'd been him or me and I'm not dying out here, wherever the fuck we are. Where are we anyway?"

He wasn't sure what to say. Sweat itched in his palms, between his fingers. Down his back. "You don't know where you are?"

"I've been locked in there for...I don't know. Couple months maybe. I don't have a car or nothing. I came up from Portland but, don't want to, can't go back there."

"Why's that?"

"Whole 'nother ball of worms right there." She drummed her fingers on the door. "He came in the club where I worked and promised me big money. He tipped real good and knew the talk. My girlfriend been buying Oxy from him for a while. She used to come up here too but I haven't seen her in...a while. You know, I'm gonna pay you more to keep quiet about all this. You'll keep quiet and be cool about all this?"

"I got no one to tell," he said. And he didn't.

Wal-Mart glowed like a docked warship, buttressed with huge slabs of pale concret, crowned in lego-blue and bathed in fluorescent light that flickered with bugs. It seemed to have sailed off to war and docked here to act as the town's commissary.

Semis thrummed with air-conditioning. A couple slept in an old Chevy bandaged with tape. Pick-up trucks, one after the other seemd to cruise the perimeter, slowingands waching.

A couple more twenty dollar bills landed on the seat beside him. "I'm gonna need you to go in there for me. You cool with that?"

She couldn't get to wherever she was going with blood caked to her clothes and matted in her hair. She couldn't even go into Wal-Mart looking like that. "An electric razor and some clothes. Need to get rid of everything."

He held the money toward the light.

"It's good money and I got more."

"That's not it really," he said. He turned and faced her for the first time. Closer, he could see she was younger than he might have originally thought. The blood was like chocolate smeared across a child's face. "This is sort of fucked-up."

"Yeah? Tell me about it. I'm going to need something to get all this blood and shit off me." I can feel him in my hair, on my skin.

"As you might guess I got a few charges on me and the police would just assume put me away and forget about me altogether given the choice. And, I'd never see any of this money I got here. I fucking earned this money. I earned very fucking cent."

He watched an old lady dump a pile of dog food cans in her back seat, peel back the tin lid of one and set it in front of her Schnauzer. She then tossed the plastic bag on the ground and patted the animal on its head. "I don't doubt that. How much is it you got?"

She almost smiled for the first time that he could see. "You wanna leave me the keys while you go inside?"

"Sure, if you want to trade me that bag of money for them."

The car door was open and a pair of legs was hanging out the back when he returned. Even from a dozen parking spaces away, he could see the shadows of bruises on her calves. She barely seemed to notice when he set the bag down on the floor in front of her. Her blouse was pulled up a little and he could see a silver stud in her naval.

"I'm in no condition to be getting any attention and people here creep me out." She lifted herself and dug through the bag. "For fuck's sake though, these are some ugly clothes."

"You could have come in with me."

"I'm fucking with you but," she looked into the bag again, "They really fucking are."

The meter ticked.. It was already above the sixty dollars she had initially given him. He wasn't going to say anything. She was surely good for it, yet she handed him three more twenties when his attention returned to her.

She held out two more twenties. "Have you ever done any barbering?"

Once, when he was a teenager, he had shaved his own head.. Partly out of some vague rebellion, part out of being fed up with it getting in his eyes while he was riding his CR250 that

he wound up trading for a half ounce of hash. It didn't turn out well, but nothing ever did. "You sure about that?"

Blood flaked from her kinky hair when she straightened it between her fingers. "Most definitely. You've got to turn the car on, so we can get power to the razor."

He held the razor in his hand while she held the cord, a usb wire and a small black square. A radio show he had found flipping through the channels called *Forgotten Forty-Fives* was playing a James Carr song Curtis recognized. He turned the volume up and willed his hand to steady.

"He didn't like it long because it isn't straight white-girl hair. My dad was black. My mother was...drunk most the time. I think I reminded her of him. She didn't know what to do about my hair so I had to figure it out on my own. She had her moments but not many of them."

He flinched when he touched the blade to her skin. She winced like it hurt but straightened her back as if to suggest he was doing just fine. As the hair fell in front of her, she grabbed it and stuffed it in the plastic bag.

For a moment, there was only the distant, fifty year old song and the razor, and that was all that existed for him. The razor seemed to move in time with the *Dark End of the Street*. It might have been the first time he really heard the song.

She kept time patting her fingers on her knee.. "You know even a Wal-MARt doesn't seem so bad after that motherfucker. It's like my senses were gone for a while and they just came back, here of all places. My dad liked music like this. *Old* music. One of the only things I remember about him. I like it too. It's music that's been around the block. Like us. People like us go around the block and wind up in the same places. Isn't that right?" Her hair was nearly shorn off. She had a bottle of rose-petal hand sanitizer that smelled more like cheap Sangria in her hand and was going over her bare skin with it and using her discarded blouse to clean herself.

He couldn't find any words to say. He wanted to drive away but knew that he couldn't. The song ended, a commercial for insurance played and there they were again, the lights above them buzzing.

"California," She said finally. "I always wanted to."

"It's expensive."

She lifted the bag. "I got money." She breathed. "You wanna drive me down there?"

"You're kidding right? That's a lot further than Spokane." This was not a decision he wanted to be left to make. He needed the money and she had money. The cab owner would want the day and night lease but that wouldn't be a problem. He did the math. Seven hundred

miles down to the Bay at least, at two-sixty a mile. Of course, he'd give a discount. He couldn't charge her eighteen-hundred dollars.

Most drivers would charge the full rate. And, with this, he was committing a crime. At least, that's what he thought. He'd rather her pitch the amount she had in mind. "How much is something like that worth to you? I've never done that before." Without thinking better of it, he added. "You could buy a car for the money it would cost."

She rubbed at her shaven head. "I never knew how to drive." She said this as though her life was already over and she was looking back on it. She stood, and tied the bag of hair, clothes labels and stickers, shut and carried it to the trash. "Also, someone like me, up here? I stand out like a cat on a leash."

"Yeah," he said after thinking on it for a minute. "Yeah, I guess you're right."

"I'm sure you need money. I mean those app-cabs got to be killing your bottom line."

He shrugged. "True, but I don't like chances. This, to be honest, you, make me nervous."

For the first time, she stopped moving. Stopped, still completely. "You a good judge of people? I am." She seemed to think about this for a moment. "Well, most of the time. When I'm sober at least."

"You sober now?"

"Sober enough to know I don't have a lot of options. Sober enough to know I just shot a man, and sober enough also, to worry he isn't as dead as I'm thinking he might be."

A single twitch of a siren clicked on and off. The large man in the driver's seat didn't remove himself from the Jeep he drove. Seemingly, he didn't need to. It was last call in the Wal-Mart parking lot for the evening. Slowly, the other cars in the lot coughed and sputtered to life. The roving trucks headed back to the highways and surface streets. Curtis put the car in drive.

"You like drugs?" She wore a navy blue sweatshirt with the hood drawn up and basketball shorts. She was painting her nails a bright green that smelled like sour apple candy.

He laughed. "Yeah, I guess I do."

"I got some. I mean, I took some from him. Not much. I told myself that, once I get to wherever it is that I'm going, I'll be clean. Maybe a little weed or mushrooms but not real, put-you-in-the-ground drugs. That's how you lose yourself and everything else."

"I'm good." He could tell her about his sobriety but that wasn't something he advertised. "You almost done?" He nodded toward her toes. "The smell."

“Of my feet or the polish?” He heard the cap screw back on the nail polish bottle. “I’m just kidding. I’ve been saving the nail polish. I bought it at a shopping mall in Reno. Biggest Little Town? Fucking shit. I lived off two-dollar scrambled egg and hash breakfasts for three weeks. Stayed in some flea-trap with some Alkie bitch that tried to rip me off. There wasn’t anything or anyone there to be pretty for so I never used it.”

“What were you doing there?”

She sighed and rolled up the window. “It was just the next place I guess. I got two teeth knocked out hitching a ride with a biker and, one day I got to talking to some cowboy gambler over coffee and eggs and he had just come off a long game. Three days, he told me. Three days and he’d held steady and not over-played. He was old-school. Told me about country music like Jim Reeves and George Jones. Said he used to go out and dance. He’d given up drinking and only gambled and drank coffee. Traded one vice for the other, I guess. Anyhow., one of these guys he played with was a dentist. He flipped open his phone made a phone call and got implants arranged for me. She opened her mouth but he couldn’t see anything in the dark. “I find a steadiness in keeping pieces of myself whole even though the bigger me might be coming apart. Keeps me grounded and focused. Even in that house, there were things, small things I could do for me. Even if I was high. You have to keep pieces of yourself close and not let them get away. Seen a lot of people lose themselves. Seen a lot of people get hurt real bad.” She seemed to ponder this for a moment. “I need you to do something for me.”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing?”

“I need you to do something for me besides driving.”

He couldn’t tell if she was flirting but he had worked himself into the idea of the road trip. He’d take his own car, maybe take route One back up the Coast, take his time, spend a night or two in beachside towns forgetting about everything else. These thoughts came to him often, yet now, this quickly, he was seeing her there with him, forgetting about all of this and everything and, quietly, starting out West at the promise of something, anything new.

She sighed. “We need to go back. I need to be sure that he is actually dead.”

“A bit late for that.”

“If he’s not, he’ll find me. I’ll never sleep again. It’s all come crashing on me. I was so relieved to get out, I blocked out what’s left behind.”

“The way you described the situation made him sound pretty fucking dead.”

"I mean, the shot did go through him but he was just on the floor murmuring when I left. Five hundred, shit a thousand, on top of the thousand for driving me down. We have to go and make sure. I'll never feel safe again if we don't. I have to know."

"The blood." He had crossed the freeway and was driving her back. It might have been instinctual or...something else. He couldn't quite tell. "If you shot him, blood wouldn't get on you like that. Shit, I thought you were hurt when I picked you up."

She was silent for a minute. "I had to get his key from him. For the safe. He never let it go. I don't feel bad but, I hate doing this to you but I need to see. Do you ever feel like you left the oven on and you know you probably didn't but you might have and-"

"Yeah. It's like a nervous tic."

"A nervous tic that will eat you alive. Only, instead of an hour or a day, this is forever. It'll be forever that he follows me. Around every corner. All the time, everywhere. I'll never let go of him. I need to do this."

He pulled the cab off to the shoulder. In the moonlight, the bare scalp of the hills showed in spots where the trees had been shaven away. There were lights up there, like stars where people were living quietly. "What if he's not? What if he's outside with a rifle looking for you?"

"He's dead, I'm sure. I'm eighty-percent sure. Eighty-five percent."

"Shit," he said to her or himself.

"It's a lot of money to drive, what ten miles or so?"

"And to see a dead body. Or a dying one?"

"He's useless as a spilt bucket of water if he's anything. But I need to know. I have to."

Getting out of the car, he felt something sting the crook of his arm. He stood there for a moment but she stayed in the cab, staring hopefully out the window, toward him. He paced and kicked at rocks in the ground. He was stalling. She knew that he would do better than he did. But, at the very least, he had to feign fear, hesitancy or both.

"Fifteen hundred," she said, leaning into the window. "Fifteen hundred and we'll go back." Her eyes softened. It seemed as though she'd known him longer than he'd known himself. Or, more likely, she knew what he needed. She had put herself in front of him and was now expecting him to put himself in front of her.

She fished around in the bag. He could see her fingers moving beneath the surface. Pulling the money out, she thanked him.

As he got back into the car, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

The radio was playing *Mighty Like a Rose* by Them. Curtis vaguely knew the song from an ex-girlfriend's mix-tape She had left him to move to New York with only a voicemail a week later from an apartment she was sharing with four other people in the East Village. This was the same apartment she was found in with a cord tied around her arm slumped next to the bed weeks later. It was then that Curtis realized that he never really knew her and doubted every relationship before or since. He told this story to the woman behind him who listened and bit her fingernails. She had a ring on her middle finger that she continued to turn. "Most of the people I've known have died. I don't feel anything about it anymore. It's just something that happens."

"Aren't you afraid of it?"

"Dying? There's no time to worry about what's beyond our control. I would prefer not to."

"So this is just, no big deal?"

She shifted in her seat. "You don't know what this guy did." She shifted again. "He had all this uneven soil in the backyard and the grass never grew back right. He said he buried other girls back there."

"Are there any other....girls there now?"

"Nah. Not now. They're gone. Shit, it could've been fucking dogs buried out there. He was so full of shit about everything else."

"You think it was just dogs?"

"Possibly. It wasn't like I was going to go digging whatever it was up to find out."

He turned down the radio. They were getting closer. It was dark, save for moonglow that webbed through the trees. "You feel anything about it? Shooting him I mean."

"Not a damn thing but the relief that'll come when I found out it's done for real."

She pointed ahead. "There's a driveway up there. It's tough to see because of all the brush but it's between two old, dead trees."

Curtis slowed the car. He checked the rear-view for lights, sign of life.

"There isn't anyone else around here and if there are, they keep to themselves. Bomb goes off and they don't pay any mind. Go down the road a quarter mile and park there next to the Cadillac."

"He's got a Cadillac?"

"It doesn't run or anything. He's got a bunch of old beat-up cars."

The car was shaped like a toaster, the frame thin as a tin can and it rattled like dentures on the unpaved driveway. It didn't weigh much and always felt vulnerable to just about anything.

“You can flick on the highs. It won’t bother no one,” she said. “Like I said, the neighbors are militia folk. He sold them this or that on occasion. They got shit going on that they don’t want no one to see themselves.”

“I’m more worried about blowing a tire out than anything else.” The hum of the bugs grew to a low commotion, a timpani of whistles, snaps and buzzes that was dizzying if Curtis focused on it. “I’ve been in the city my whole life. I’m not used to this country boy shit.”

“I wasn’t either,” she said. “There’s the Caddy.”

Curtis couldn’t even tell what make the car was, let alone that it was a Cadillac. Somewhere beneath the layers of rust, mold and bird shit, there very well might have been a Cadillac, but, in the dark, from here, its shadow reminded Curtis of pictures of poached rhinos he’d seen in magazines.

He parked next to the deadened beast and flicked off the lights. The house was up a small hill. Bugs swarmed around a security light. From here, Curtis could make out flecks of light around a curtained bay window but nothing else.

“That’s where he is,” she said. “The T.V room.” She rustled through her bag, pulled out a revolver and handed it over to him. “Take that. Just in case.”

“In case of what?”

“What do you think? You know how to use it?”

He shook his head.

“You cock the hammer and fire. Practically shoots itself.”

The gun weighed more than he thought it would be. He let it sit in his palm for a moment before he sunk it into his pocket.

“He’s dead though. I’m sure of it.”

Curtis sat for a moment, listening to the electric pulse of the bugs. Somewhere out there was the rest of the world waiting, or not waiting, for him to return to it. And here he was, wondering what type of person he would be returning to it. “You’re coming with me,” he said finally. “Only way I’m going up there is if you’re coming with me.”

She bowed her head forward and rubbed at her face, her temples and then over her scalp. “Okay. There’s just one more thing.”

“Now what?”

“We are in this together now. Me and you.” She opened the door and disappeared behind the car.

What windows weren't covered up by once-champagne-now-urine-colored drapes were covered in aluminum foil. Or both.

It was quiet though. Curtis put his ear to the front door. Nothing. Not a thing. It was going to be okay. He had never seen a dead body before but he saw this as a grim step of maturation. He swallowed hard. She turned the doorknob from behind him.

It smelled faintly of blood, a boiled-copper sort of odor. He stepped quietly into the first room. A large American flag hung over a bricked-over fireplace. A caribou bust hung on the wall alongside a Schlitz sign that once might have had a light inside of it. Was this a sitting room? As he stepped further inside, he could see a safe in the corner that had been opened. He walked over, started to bend over to get a better look when he heard a moan.

She touched his shoulder and held her hand there for a moment.

A moaning again along with a shift of rug and, something, an empty mug or something falling off a table.

"The gun," she whispered in his ear. "Where's the gun?"

He pulled it from his pocket. Maybe it was her pushing forward behind him, or an innate curiosity but, somehow he moved through the room feeling fever-swollen and grotesque. Blood smeared across the floor. Bloody handprints were stamped over the walls. A Confederate flag hung at the far end of the room. Beneath it, lay the man's body. He held a hand to his gut and the other clutched a handful of threadbare rug. Beyond him, the kitchen was dark and empty. He was alone and, most likely, in the final throes of whatever life he had led.

"You," he pointed to Curtis, or, actually to her who had stepped in the room behind him. "You did this to me."

She stepped past Curtis, approached the man and bent to the floor. She held herself there for a moment and just, sort of, examined him. "I locked up all his guns before I left. Through the key out off the driveway." She walked past him, into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and pulled out a beer. "Either of you want one? I usually don't drink but I usually don't shoot redneck pimps either. A day of unusualls is what this is." She snapped the beer open and took a long drink. She looked to the can as if it could speak. "It's refreshing," she said finally.

"You bitch," the man said. "You did this...you cunt."

"All those women buried in the backyard are thanking me right now," she said.

"Fuck," he muttered. "You don't know shit."

"I've been around enough to know you. You're not original or unique. You're more common than a cold." She seemed to examine the room as if she'd never seen it before.

“Dimestore pusher taking advantage of people in a spot. I’ve come across a dozen, two dozen of you all over the motherfucking country. You’re nothing new.”

“And what about him?” He said toward Curtis who had forgotten about the gun he held in his hand until now. It had become extra baggage he was carrying. “You her pimp now?” He coughed and spat bloody phlegm over rug that was already matted with it. “Or wait, maybe she’s your pimp. What is it?”

She turned to Curtis. “He’s helping me move on, is who he is. He’s also one of two of the last people you’re going to see in this fucking world. How’s that?” She bent down again. “How’s that feel?”

“Call a doctor,” he said quietly. “Call a fucking ambulance.”

“Now, you want to be nice? You know they’ll lock you down for certain if they come here and you wind up surviving this. Then you go off to jail, hook up with your peckerwood friends and find some boy to take advantage of inside. I don’t think so.”

“What do you want?”

“I was unsure about shooting you. At first. And then the pills wore off.” She stepped closer to him and bent toward the floor. “And I realized maybe I didn’t actually kill you all the way.”

“I ain’t gonna die. I’ve been shot before. This aint’ shit. A bit of shot ain’t gonna do me. And some black bitch and her faggot friend sure ain’t gonna be the ones who end me.”

“That right?”

Before Curtis could think or react, the gun was gone from his hand. She held it now in the middle of the room. She stood over him. “There aren’t going to be any last words. Nothing like that. I’ve heard enough.” With that, she cocked the hammer and fired.

The force of the bullet slammed his body into the floor. A spark of blood shot up on impact. He moaned like he might get up but succumbed, fell and stopped moving.

They both stood quiet for a moment. The smell of gunpowder and blood. She took another drink of her beer and handed the gun back to Curtis. “We’ll find a bridge to throw this off of,” she said. She took the beer to the kitchen, rinsed the can and dropped it into the trash. “Come on,” she said. “We have to go.”

He couldn’t feel his legs. She guided him. Out the front door, into the darkness, walking toward the car. The quiet was immense, wide and deep. He wasn’t sure he could drive, or do anything for that matter.

Yet, his feet moved. One step before other as every other person does in any other situation in which they are capable. All those people out there, beyond the bent backs of the

half-shaven hills, where people were doing jobs and dancing and drinking and doing anything they took for granted like, walking.

“I can throw away that leash now.” She opened the side of the car and climbed inside. He could hear her sigh from ten paces away and knew what she meant. She needed to leave. They both did. They needed to move beyond where they were and find a new place. He would drive and she would lead the way.