

Thank you Cameron for your thoughtful feedback.

Do not publish without my explicit permission.

Standing alone in a broken-glassed bus shelter in the middle of nowhere, I'm watching the rain pouring like a spilt shipment of beans and the streetlights staining everything the colour of an orange gone bad.

It's cold.

I'm hungry.

He's late.

And then, it happens. A bus pulls over and a body jumps off. I can't make out his face but I know it's him because I know that swagger. It's the fuck-y'all attitude of someone Life liked slapping around.

His boots hit the hard pavement and the scene burns away like morning mist. Now I'm hot, I'm sweating, he's thrusting, big shoulders slamming, the headboard hitting drywall.

Bam, bam, bam!

My eyes snapped open.

A fat swine was thumping the diner table. "Enough," it rasped, sour-looking. "Yer disturbin' the customers." It heaved its flesh to the kitchen, carrying a tray as empty as the joint I was in.

I rearranged my trousers and rubbed the dull ache on my chest, clinging to the bits of my dream like an addict to a high. Loving it as much as I hated it.

My eyes floated down to my watch. The jumper cable to reality connected and a shotgun later I was on my feet, my shoulders setting the grimy lights jangling and the coffee bean snarling. I wiped the grease on my pants and lurched towards the exit with a body that felt as though it had rusted over years ago.

As chance had it, there was a jingle at the door just then and Jim Burkman sauntered in. He gave me a once over and an easy smile.

"Hey, Avrum." he greeted in a voice too friendly to be innocent.

"Jim." I nodded, but didn't smile back. This baby bear howled in a chilling way when he shot his load. Better not chance it tonight with a full moon. I was late as it was with the payload.

I dragged my bad foot across the parking lot, fumbled for my keys, and finally fit myself into the snug and slightly smelly lair I'd called home for the past seven years. The weary leather seat sighed as I shifted my weight. My fingers lingered for a moment on an old postcard clipped to the dashboard, and then in went the key and I was off.

I switched on the CB as I pulled onto the highway but I was only half listening to the ratchet jaw go on about some escaped felon stalking the region. Golden lights illuminated a familiar and friendly road, but the moon cast its own ghostly glow on a landscape that was neither familiar nor friendly. It was the kind of scene that could corner a man's thoughts and make him think about things which did no good to anyone.

Suddenly, a figure caught my headlights. I backed off the hammer with the engine still roaring and heard the rapid staccato sound of shoes hitting gravel shoulders. A burly shape materialized at the side window.

"Pretty late to be on the road, eh?" I yelled.

"You going east?" the other man shouted back, shielding his mouth from the exhaust.

"Aye, get in," I told him with a jab of my thumb. I was six-foot-two and I hadn't a life worth anybody's trouble in taking.

A thick arm reached up, grabbed the side door and swung the rest of its cargo smoothly into the front seat. He slammed the door shut and I hammered down. I could just make out the outline of high cheek bones and a wide-based jaw with a week-old crop of fur. A dirty wifebeater was stretched

between a pair of heavy-set shoulders and a waist narrow enough to make most women jealous.

"Name's Cameron." said the man, turning sharply. "Call me Cam. You got a lighter?" All of a sudden I was feeling funny. There was something familiar in that rough, rumbling voice. His restless eyes were as dark as crude oil.

"Yeah, sure," I mumbled as I leaned over with the lighter. Turning, I caught his face in the red glow of the flame.

Red like the Devil.

I hit the breaks hard.

He swore and looked at me in a fierce way, eyes narrowing into slits. "Hey, buddy, what the hell..." His arms flexed on both sides, ready for a fight.

"Sorry, Cam..." I drawled, biting the end off his name and tasting bitterness. "Thought I saw something cross the road." I tightened up on the rubber band with my eyes fixed on nothing. I was angry. I had an idea why.

"Y'know what, maybe you'd better pull over." His voice was like black ice, cold and tinted with danger.

I dropped the hammer and sent the machine screaming. I was shovelling coal to Hell and not even the bite of a warm knife made me care. "I said to friggin' pull over, you motherfucker!" he yelled. His eyes were twin drums of petrol set ablaze. I almost laughed. The fucking universe had shifted and he still hadn't a clue.

"Why don't you teach me?" I shouted, the engine roaring at a hundred and sixty. "Teach me again."

Then I looked at him straight; at the body he'd built to kill, the lips he'd taught to lie, and the eyes he'd made to hate.

Straight at a memory.

"Jesus," Cam said, sounding like someone being crucified. He'd finally figured it out. His eyes ran in panic from the demons in his mind as his knife fell from nerveless fingers. A mess of hands groped frantically for the door, and then

for something in his pocket. For a moment I thought it was a gun until he pulled it out and swallowed it.

He sighed and calmed right down.

I eased off the gas, feeling as though I were a ripped fuel tank with all the juice spilling out. We were in for a long night, and I wasn't sure if there'd be a morning.

"Give me the lighter again?" Cam asked after a bit. He still sounded strained, like wheels trying to flop-flip fast. As he wiped at his brow with his forearm I got a whiff of him, a hundred miles of fresh sweat and adrenaline.

"Yeah..." I cleared my throat. We met for an instant as I handed him the lighter, (still in my hand somehow,) before his eyes stretched away into the darkness. Cam took a deep drag of his cigarette and when he spoke again, his voice had a distant quality that reminded me of the vague rumblings of prairie thunder.

"You know," he said slowly, "Me and my pal Mur - her name was Murva - used to go driving just like this. Except we were sixteen, and we didn't have no rig. Just my Gran's razzle-dazzle station wagon, all patched up with the house paint."

He rested the knuckles of one hand against the window, the other he lay slightly curled on his thigh. I knew full well they could break a man's neck as easy as break bread.

"Don't get me wrong, Mur wasn't my girlfriend - just best buds - though she was definitely all girl. She had that queer sway in her hips, if you know what I mean. Always thought she'd look gorgeous in a red satin dress." The corners of my mouth itched to betray me. I didn't need to see to know his lips were curled.

"Anyway," he continued through hooded eyes, "This one weekend her folks decide to take the train down South. So I thought, what the heck, why waste the free car? I was real proud of my new licence, see. Mur hadn't gotten hers yet, though I'd already taught her the ropes..." Cam trailed off.

With an effort he tried to sit up, only making it part way. "Anyhow, I say to Mur, 'Why don't we go pick up some girls at the bar?' Mur wasn't so keen about the whole thing so I

said she could pick up some pansy guys if she liked." Cam paused, another lazy smile in the smoke. He knew I was listening. "So I drove us down that night, and I kissed-up some girls. Pretty soon we were all pissed drunk and making stupid talk, but then when we got back to the car, we saw it - a big friggin' dent in the back of the Lincoln! Someone must have backed up and ran off. Mur started going on about her folks killing her, and I was feeling like shit because it'd been my idea. Well, we figured the only thing to do was to take it to the panelbeater. The cost of the repairs came straight from her savings."

Cam took another drag from his cigarette and exhaled through the side of his mouth so that the smoke came out in drowsy wisps. His words were beginning to slur. "Mur's parents came home the next day, and we didn't say a word. But then we hear her father come in from the garage and go to Mur's mother in this amazed kind of voice, 'Nancy, you won't believe this, but a miracle has happened! Remember that dent I'd told you about on Thursday? Well, the dent's GONE! Bless our souls, the car's dang well *fixed itself!*'"

He chuckled, a low rumble that sent a shiver scurrying up my spine.

He could do that to me still.

After a few minutes he was dead to the world, looking as innocent as an angel's, though I found no peace in it. Grainy images recede in my mind's eye like scenery in a rear-view mirror. There was a small dark house with sticky floors; a pretty mother with her faithful bottle of Kentucky Bourbon; a hard-bitten grandmother; an angry, pixie-faced boy; the empty space where a father should have been...

I turned back to the road. Time passed.

"Y'know, I never did pay her back for my half of the bodywork," remarked Cam, his words as gravelly as asphalt. "I always imagined she'd be married with children by now."

He opened one eye, which I knew was hazel, and fingered the old postcard of sunflowers I'd clipped onto the dash. "Who's this from?" Cam murmured, half to himself, staring at it hard.

"My bud Mac," I replied after a moment. "We thought we'd buy up a lot one day and start a sunflower farm together... Still wish we had." I stopped, startled at my admission.

"Huh," grunted Cam, watching the darkness again. "What happened?"

"Well, Mac... One day he just git. Don't know where he went. I got this in the mail a couple years later. No message. No return address. Just the card." There hadn't even been a name. But I'd recognized the chicken-scratch as soon as I saw it.

"Sounds like a pretty shitty friend to me." Cam said glibly.
"Why d'you keep it, anyway?"

It was a good question. But I was done answering and getting nothing to show for it. "Why you think he sent it?" I shot back, and he went as still as a photograph. The game was up and he knew it.

"Aye, Mac?" *Come on, make me hate you like I should.*

Mac growled like a cornered hound. "You think you can push me—"

"You sure pushed me." I cut him off sharply, even as the searing memory of it made me wonder if this was such a good idea.

He sucked in air and tightened his grip on his pocket, but there was no way I was letting him get smashed again on my time. Touching him – even just the back of his hand – was like a shot of brandy, the kick in it made stronger with age. Mac must have felt something too, because he sat back hard, breathing between his knuckles.

We passed a bright green number thirty-two on the road and it dawned on me I'd missed a turn somewhere and I didn't have a clue where we were.

"I don't know what the hell was in that stuff, Avrum," started Mac in a voice like rusted metal. "I was fucked up, that night."

Yeah, you sure were. The night Hell yawned and swallowed us whole. My mouth went dry as I braced myself for what was

coming head-on on both lanes of the highway. I saw too late we were headed for a hit.

"I never meant it to happen. I never meant to hurt...I know you've got no reason to believe. I don't ask for no forgiveness. What I did... Oh fuck..."

The memory of it had a million jagged edges and screamed every which way. It was pushing, punching, kicking, breaking... I needed it to stop.

"...I didn't see anything except red, didn't know what I'd done 'til the yelling had stopped..."

Stop, stop, fucking stop...

"...and I was standing at the top of those metal stairs, looking down—"

I slammed the breaks so hard the wheels screeched.

We stopped.

Mac ripped the door open and leaned over to get sick. I had a mind to join him. I studied the veins in the wheel instead, until Mac pulled back in and we swung away from where we'd been straddling the lanes.

I'd wanted to see him, waking in the hospital the morning after, but of course he'd long gone by then. Now here he was again, somehow, his hands on his knees, a small dark line trickling from where his teeth had broken into his knuckles. The sheen of sweat on the back of his neck stank stronger than the toilet stalls I'd sometimes gone when the itch was just too strong to shake.

I'd once yearned till it hurt to tell Mac how much I appreciated him. But we'd let too many words left unsaid; too much time pass; too many forks in the road lead us away. Nothing was the same and there was no use trying to go back.

A faded road sign with "Service Station 20 km Ahead" printed on it reminded me we were lost. I was hoping to God that we'd find a decent Timmy's at the pickle park. I needed mud bad and the last greasy spoon had been a place no trucker deserved being holed up.

Feeling Mac's eyes on me - the first time since he'd knifed me earlier - I got a queasy feeling he was taking us over another cliff.

"There's something else I gotta tell ya," he began, soft as a heap of chicken feathers and just as unsettling.

We made a right turn on the road and the moon swung out of sight, pitching us into darkness. We were coming to that cliff fast.

"You asked me why I sent that postcard. Well, I really don't know why I did, honest to God. But if there's one thing I know for sure -"

And here it was.

"-It's that I never thought you needed a red satin dress." His breath caught.

Gorgeous. That was the word he'd used.

The ground fell away, and for a moment I felt as if I were suspended in nothing but the thinnest air. I'd thought I'd had it all figured, what was and what wasn't possible in this life. But I'd been wrong from the get go.

"Not for me. Not ever," spoke Mac, and there it was again, giving guitar strings to his voice and country blues to his eyes. A truth as naked as a newborn babe.

A sea of memories rose up and parted around two sun-brown boys grappling like bear cubs in a wave of golden sunflowers. I saw the flex of muscles; the sweat; the smell; the way he looked at me then. It was the same way he was looking at me now.

Some words don't need saying; some bonds no time can break; some roads go back to the start.

We slid into the exit ramp on the wind rushing through our ears. I saw myself a kid again, riding high on an eighteen-wheeler for the first time, eyes as big as the wheels. By the time we caught sight of the pit I could have kissed the stars.

I pulled up against the grass in a dark corner of the parking lot and killed the engine. We were just two heaving shapes in the shadow of a moonlit night.

"Well, I guess I aught to be going now, huh?" said Mac, blinking away a suspicious shine. "Thanks for the ride, bud," he said in a gruff sort of way, and before I could say a thing he was gone, striding across the empty parking lot with his wide shoulders balled up like baseballs and his big arms swinging into the orange light.

He didn't get far.

I leapt out of the open door and whipped him around by his shirt. My fingers touched his stubble-dressed jaw, and looked at hazel eyes that didn't know what to do. Our trembling breaths shrunk the inches till our parched lips drew the Hallelujah from our souls.

Mac broke loose and staggered back, eyes wide like deer caught in the headlights. The next I knew, I was flat on my back and pinned beneath him. My shirt came off, and then so did his. His wifebeater looked small bunched up next to the weight of him, sparsely furred and rippling with evidence. Nuzzling my neck, his coarse bristles scraped below the smear of tears.

With a firm grip on my trapped cock, he murmured in his melodious way, "I always knew you had a big one," as he sniffed down my stomach to my crotch. He made quick work of my zipper, and with a few short strokes he had my stick in full throttle. He went down on it pronto, taking it long and deep and wet, his practiced tongue going around and around like gears taking me up a hill. The stars tore through my eyes and my engine purred like a high-horsepower kitten.

I tugged at his 501's and he let go of my dick with a kiss. He stood up and kicked away the rest of his clothes, shoes and all, and pretty soon he'd stripped me too.

We rolled around for a bit, pigs in the wet grass, our lips bruising our collar bones and our sticks rubbing up a fire. "Fuck me," I told him, and he shot me a look that could have melted metal. Up went my legs over the curve of his back as he licked my socket clean. My dick waved around,

bare to the air, till he gripped it rough and played meat puppet with it.

He spat on his prick, and ploughed into my pucker slow and sure. I won't say it didn't hurt, because when it came to Mac, it had never stopped. But as he oiled me good with his thrusting cock, there was nothing I could do but moan to his sweet sweet rhythm. He was the Devil, he was the blessed Lord, he was Mac with hazel fuck-y'all eyes.

With a shudder and a roar he pumped his cum into my gut. Trembling, we lay with my load smeared between our heaving chests and his cum trickled down my crack like a tear. Shit, cum, and tears, that was what we had between us, as we lay listening to crickets and highway traffic on a night that would never age a day in our memory.

By and by, the sweat dried on our skin and we shuffled to our feet. We knew better than to bait the bears. I picked up the clothes we'd strewn about and chucked them into the truck. As I stuck a foot in, I caught Mac looking at my mangled toes like a kid who'd broken the family china.

I leaned back and hooked an arm around Mac's neck, pulling him close. "Y'know, I'm real grateful I'll never have to wear a dress," I said softly. "Never could look pretty for the picture." I cracked a smile, though it wasn't easy. I'd almost forgotten how.

He looked away.

"Get in Mac." I coaxed him gentle-like. Time enough to deal with this later.

He hesitated for a while longer, before his forearms flexed and lifted his ass onto the platform. He sat there dangling his legs buck-naked, looking the same way I'd found him on the morning his old man walked out the door and never walked back in again. He'd been just three days shy of his ninth birthday.

"Come on, buddy - on your feet," I said, and dragged him through the curtain to my bunk. We lay down on the sheet and Mac began kissing my feet like I was Jesus in the House of the Pharisee.

Bringing his hands to my hardening cock, I made him see I was no Prophet.

He took me on all four that second time, after he'd sucked and rimmed me again. His cock went down my cum-moistened hole as smooth as the finest Whisky, sliding back and forth, back and forth, making my sweet spot sing, making me moan and thrust back and cry out till the Second Coming was upon us and we were lost.

Lost.

Riding alone in the back of a beaten-up bus, I'm heading to God knows where with the rain pouring like a spilt shipment of beans and the streetlights staining everything the colour of an orange gone bad.

It's cold,

I'm hungry,

I'm late.

And then it happens. A body materializes on the side of the road. I can't make out his face but I know it's him because I know that swagger. It's the fuck-y'all attitude of someone Life liked slapping around.

I pull the wire to signal the driver, but the bus doesn't slow down. I see him go by, and I pull again, panicking. But it doesn't stop. It just doesn't stop. The scene burns away like morning mist...

I know even before I open my eyes that he's gone.

The pain cuts like broken glass, but only in the time it takes to breathe. I roll over to squint at the sunlight dancing beneath the folds of the curtain, and suddenly I'm sure of what I want more than anything in life.

I stretch, groping for his lingering smell, and find a note beneath my pillow. *I know I still owe you*, it reads. Six scrawled words, two twenties and a handful of coins. That's all he'd left.

It's more than I deserve.

I take the note with me into the morning glare. When I can see again all I can do is stare at the mysteries of the Almighty.

On both sides of a road leading away from the highway are rows and rows of sunflowers, their yellow manes ablaze as far as the eye can see, saluting the sun, every one of them, from dawn till dusk, wherever it goes.

Knowing that Mac would have seen this too almost makes me laugh.

I put the note with the postcard and clip them to the dashboard. I dress quickly and fire up the ignition.

I look into the sun and remember -

He'd wanted to go east.