

Beginnings

There were two other people in the car with Carolyn. They had taken a lot of money that wasn't theirs. Technically, it was the other two who had taken the money: Calvin and Ray. Carolyn had just sat in the car waiting while the two guys scrambled into the filthy alley and crept up to the driverless rusting Chrysler, broke the window, reached in through the shards, then snatched the paper-bagged stash of two thousand and some odd dollars.

She had sweated fiercely in the car while she waited, even though it wasn't that hot. Carolyn thought it would've been warmer in San Francisco in July – being California and summer and all – but it was cool and windy where she waited on one side of Mission Street, running the engine until the boys came back with the money. And when they reached the Golden Gate Bridge in their Civic, there was so much fog they couldn't see anything but the road. Even the massive, red, jagged-rising towers of the bridge disappeared into the mist above.

"Easy," Ray said from the back seat behind Carolyn, who drove. "There's nothin' to hurry for now."

"Just do what you're doing," added Calvin, who sat beside Ray in the back.

They'd both hopped into the car through the back door when they came running out of the alley. Carolyn said one of them should get in the front, but they closed the door and told her to move it. She thought it looked stupid with the two of them sitting in back like a taxi, like they'd just robbed a bank.

Ray rolled down his window a little and wiggled his fingers in the air outside. Carolyn wanted to light a cigarette but thought it was too cold to open her window and didn't want the smoke in the car.

"We should have a gun," said Ray.

"Yeah?" said Calvin.

"What'll you do with a gun? You're so fuckin' retarded," Carolyn said. "You just wanna spend the money. We shouldn't spend it, yet. I wouldn't let you shoot anything anyway."

"He didn't say we were shootin' anything," Calvin said.

Ray tapped his hands feverishly on the top of Carolyn's seat, making it rumble beneath her back. "Fuck it," he said. "I'm gonna shoot all kinda things in Alaska. I'll get shotgun and a rifle, after I lose you jokers."

"Fuck you," said Calvin. "I shot two deer last year that weekend when you fags were playing football. What'd you ever shoot?"

"Bullshit, you just shot one. You're always makin' up something else," Ray sneered.

"I fuckin' shot two, but I just bagged the one. The big one. The little one wasn't worth it, but I pegged it good. Whole leg went red in the snow, it was shot. You never even been out with a gun."

"You're just a lyin' injun, all the same. All those cousins of yours are thieves, wannabes. I knew you were full of that same shit," Ray laughed. "I knew you'd steal that fuckin' money. Easy, like leadin' an Indian to water."

Calvin was half Cherokee and lived among that side of his family in their small town in central Nebraska. It was the same town that all three of them were from – where they had been going to high school and where they'd just left four days ago. Calvin and Ray hung out because they smoked meth together at parties and in the mornings before school, and Carolyn had dated Ray for a long time, although she didn't think they were a couple anymore.

"You're all talk," Calvin said. "You take it in the ass with your football fags."

Ray lunged at Calvin and shoved his forearm against his neck, slamming Calvin's head

against the window of the door. Calvin had thick, overgrown black hair that usually fell onto his forehead and covered the tops of his shoulders – now it hung in a mess in front of his face while his olive skin began to turn red.

"Fucker," Calvin said and then kicked Ray away from him.

"Whose stupid idea was this?" Carolyn yelled. "Assholes! I'll crash us, you think I care?"

Carolyn swerved their car into the right lane as they drove uphill and entered a long tunnel. Horns blared behind them and the angry sounds echoed in the concave space. The boys halted their struggle and Ray stomped hard with one foot on the floor of the car.

It was quiet for a short while. Carolyn drove with one hand on the wheel and one hand on the pack of cigarettes that she twirled in the empty passenger seat. She thought about how far Alaska seemed. It almost seemed as far away from her now as it had in Nebraska. She saw Ray in the rear view mirror; he turned to face Calvin.

"I don't even—" Ray said. "You're the stupidest Indian I ever met. I could steal from you and you wouldn't even know."

"Enough," said Carolyn. "Enough. I could just stop here. You two could take the asshole bus. I don't even want the fucking money. I'll stop

right here. I'll work at that Denny's. It's exactly what I should do."

For a moment she thought that's exactly what she would do. The night before, in Reno, Ray had clumsily coaxed her into sex, and she knew it wouldn't be the last time. Which hadn't seemed so bad before they stole the money, but now seemed like the kind of thing that would only be followed by worse things.

Carolyn didn't want to go along with taking the money – except that the guy was black and wearing a red bandana, which was definitely a gang thing, and she figured they were doing those kinds of things to each other all the time. She didn't really know any black people in Nebraska. There were some Mexicans and Indians, and a few Chinese kids that she'd see around—and they were annoying, but mostly harmless. She thought some of their accents were stupid and couldn't understand them half the time, but they weren't shooting each other, and all the neighborhoods back there were too dull to be scary. It was nothing like the way it felt when they drove through Oakland and past Treasure Island into San Francisco.

When they'd gotten off the Bay Bridge and down to the streets she'd seen homeless people cluttered on the corners and smelled waves of urine when they'd accidentally turned into an abandoned parking lot cluttered with cardboard

tents & shopping carts. They'd just been looking for some more meth, but after they found a guy and he took their cash then pointed to a skinny kid huddled in a vestibule, Ray saw the guy hustle the money down the alley and stash it in the Chrysler before taking up his spot again on the sidewalk. Ray figured all they needed to do was pull around to the other side of the block—then *smash, grab & go, baby*. While he shook the skinny kid's hand and palmed the meth, he felt like he was stealing candy. Back in the car he told Carolyn he was a cowboy and she said he meant outlaw.

She thought the guy must've been stupid to be robbed by a loser like Ray. Anybody that dumb deserved it. She didn't feel sorry for him at all; the guy had probably shot lots of people.

In the back seat Calvin and Ray burned some meth on a corner of tin foil while Carolyn followed the signs north along Highway 101.

"What way is this? Where's the water?" asked Ray.

"This ain't the coast. What you know wouldn't fill my pocket," Calvin said.

"It's California, man. Get your kicks, 'cause we're outta here. Adios, gonads!" Ray said the last part with a cigarette in his mouth. He rolled down the window and cupped his hand to light

the Marlboro with a green Bic that he'd peeled the label off of.

"You'll be leavin' me up in Anchorage when we get there. I'll just tell you now. I know somebody in Anchorage," Calvin said.

"Uh-huh. Daddy's boy. I know why you're along for the ride. Why d'ya think I asked you, stupid? You hate those injuns much as I do – leaches and drunks. Bet your daddy's just an Eskimo anyway." Ray sucked a drag from his cigarette.

"Least I got reasons. You don't even have an explanation," Calvin said.

"For what?" asked Ray. "What I need an explanation for? You injuns don't understand cowboys, that's why we kicked your ass."

"Your daddy never even taught you to shoot a gun. You wouldn't make a fuckin' cowboy."

"I'd kill 'im with these bare hands if he ever came to me with a gun. Motherfucker. I'd find a knife and slice him. You pissed your pants when we broke that window. Hee-haw!" Ray tossed his cigarette out onto the highway.

"I'm hungry," said Carolyn. "We gonna eat today?"

"Bet I kill somebody before either of you. Even without a goddamn gun. In fact, fuck you both, find me a Wal-Mart. I want a gun," Ray said.

"Did you see those fags in San Fran? I saw two fags, right away."

"Shit, I saw fags in Nebraska. You're blind. We should leave you in Seattle. You can play with your shotgun like Kurt Cobain," Calvin said and then flicked at his lighter, ready to smoke more meth.

"Fuck that sissy. I'm shady. Shay-dee! Fuck Seattle." Ray lit another cigarette. "We're ghosts in Alaska, man. I'm leavin' you and all your Eskimo shit in Anchorage. Carolyn and I won't need your shit ever again. We're doin' you a favor and you're a fuckin' dick."

"When you're sleepin' man, and you won't even know." Calvin opened his window and tapped the ashes from the foil.

Carolyn thought she might decide to stay with Calvin in Anchorage. She figured there would be jobs because of all the fish and the boats. She imagined a mountain skyline and evergreens.

At the next exit, they found a place where they could eat. Ray insisted on taking the bag of money in with him and Carolyn kept the car keys deep in her pocket. Calvin sat next to Ray in the booth and he made Ray set the bag of money between them on the floor under the table. Carolyn was so hungry that she ordered two plates of food; Ray said she should order as much as she wanted.

When they were done, the waitress dropped the check in the middle of the table and Carolyn pushed the paper in Ray's direction. He didn't look down at it, but just stared out at the other tables.

"Look at 'em all. Just a bunch of the damnedest," Ray said.

"What?" asked Calvin. "You're blind."

"Why do you keep sayin' that? Haven't you shut up already?" Ray asked.

Carolyn pointed her finger like a gun and clicked her thumb down twice—once at each of the boys. She decided that in Anchorage she would tell everyone they were from 'Frisco, and maybe after Anchorage she would go somewhere else. She stared out the window beside the booth, her stomach hurt. ~

Which Way To The End

Joey waited until they reached the crosswalk: the tall one laughing & waving his arms, and the short, tubby one—who'd thrown the hot dog wrapper into the basket—shaking his head. And when the light across the street snapped green & lit its little white, handless, footless man, Joey reached into the basket and snatched the wrapper.

The headlights from the passing cars flickered between & beneath the street-side parked ones, their shines veering rhythmically through the darkness around Joey, the monotonous tires rolling endlessly along the blacktop. He pawed at the foil gently, feeling for some spongy weight inside, hoping.

Joey squeezed everything before unwrapping it. He wanted to know first, to have some suspicion, be prepared. This is the way you did things, he thought, when everything you ever opened tried to fuck you in the face.

Joey knew it sounded like he was talking about sucking a dick, which he didn't mean specifically & exclusively. Although, when he was 13, his mouth had actually been pried by that stiff unwanted flesh.

Nothin' you open wants to fuck you in face more than a priest's robe. That's what his roommate, Thomas,

had said to him on Joey's first night at the detention center, after he told Thomas why he'd been dumped there. Joey stuck to the truth, didn't embellish his memory: Father Jerry trying to shove that fat cock in his face, and Joey driving his fist into the old man's head & neck enough times to make them swell & bulge until together they looked like a bloody stem of broccoli.

It was actually the second time that the Father had tried his luck with Joey. Of course, he didn't tell Thomas about the first time, when—out of sheer terror & confusion—Joey acquiesced, then spent the rest of the night throwing up in the shower and vowed that if Father Jerry ever tried it again, he'd kill him. And although he didn't succeed, he tried.

He'd seen his dad beat a man to death outside of Footie's Town Tap one night when he was seven, which also terrified him—until his dad tossed Joey into the car and sped off, tearing across the poorly-lit & buckling asphalt of their tiny, dying Michigan town in that ancient, awesome Camaro. That part thrilled Joey.

And as Joey slugged away at the Father, smearing a little more blood on his hand with each thud, he thought about his dad slamming his fist into the other man's face under the streetlight. He remembered how he could see the spatters of sweat & blood explode from the man's head & onto the concrete. Joey would've killed the Father too, but he just wasn't strong enough. ~