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It's Still a Free World, You Know

"What's the matter with him?" Del wants to know from the back seat.

"I'm the one's got the warrant," Vjay replies. "I'm the one who'll get busted."

"Busted," Del snorts.

"If you aren't careful we all will," I say. "Left up here."

"He's scared," Del leans between us from the back seat. "First he's bored then he's scared."

"So what," Vjay says. "Sometimes it takes —"

"We all know what it takes." Del reaches between us to punch the cigarette lighter.

"I'm the one's got the warrant out for that speeding ticket," Vjay says.

"Ticket," Del snorts. "Well it won't be just a ticket they give us this time."

"Probably be better if we *were* stopped."

"You'd like that, huh."

"Okay okay okay," I sigh, "you two."

It'd seemed like a good idea at the time.

"Makes no difference to me," Del makes an exhibition of igniting his cigarette with the push lighter. "You want to back out now."

Vjay says, "Nobody said anything about backing out."

I don't say anything.

El Camino this late at night looks long and deserted. Sprinklers are watering on the median strip, they're the only thing alive, with just a few places still open — liquor stores mostly.

"I suppose you *aren't* scared."

Del holds his right arm out, palm flat between the two us. "Look scared to you?"

"That doesn't prove anything. Sometimes it takes intelligence to be afraid."

"Where'd you read that, a book?"

"Something," Vjay mutters, "nobody'd accuse you of."

"Will you two knock it off?" I say,

"Besides," Del exhales extravagantly, "I'm not the one's got anything to prove."

"Okay, pull over," I say.

Whereupon Vjay decides he wants to after all.

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On both sides of the El Camino the only things open are a few convenience stores and the allnite U-Save liquor store. Del's muttering Screw the 7-Elevens, even though nobody in the car is even considering them. He tells us they got this safe thing they dump everything into except maybe enough to make change for a twenty. He tells us they're a waste of time even to think about them.



It's late and the stoplights are all blinking yellow caution along the Alameda from San Jose, up through Sunnyvale, Mountain View, Los Altos, clear into Menlo Park. Which is how far we've now come, looking for that perfect place. Big, so it'll have enough cash, yet secluded so it won't have many customers. You could wait weeks and it might never happen. Something like Beltramo's would be nice, the big upscale wine place, but going in you'd always be wondering who was in the back or downstairs stocking. Appear out of nowhere with a shotgun. Not a pretty picture.

"Jeeze," Del murmurs, "look at them all."

Because there are more and more prowler cars, almost the only things on the road. Palo Alto has these metallic blue spaceship-looking cruisers, and Mountain View's are white camouflage and Los Altos has the big plastic bar with the bubblegum lights across the top. Los Altos Hills, of course, still only has the sheriff's department, a tan dirt color.

"Think they'd have something better to do than just sit around waiting for something to happen," Del leans over the seat between us looking out the front window.

"Told you," Vjay says.

Del turn his head to look at the side of Vjay's face. "You didn't tell us shit."

"Knock it off," I say.

"But *you* wouldn't listen," Vjay says.

"Why don't you listen to Mike," Del tells him, "and shut the hell up."

"I got a right to talk," Vjay says. "You saying now I don't even got a right to talk?"

Jesus, a couple of teenage girls. "Let's just get it done," I say. "Or else go home."

"Not you too," Del says.

Vjay's still complaining doesn't he have a right to talk? Are you telling me I don't got a right to talk? and driving with his head peeking like an old woman over the ring of the steering wheel.

We pass L'Omelette restaurant and Dinah's Shack where it appears the entire state Highway Patrol has gone 10-7 out of service; big black

and white Dodge Polaras with low slanted hoods like a shark's and the riotgun clipped vertical to the dash.

Jesus. What the hell are we doing here? Three thirty-two ounces of Old English 800; seemed like a good idea an hour ago.

"Huh," Vjay snorts, "I got a right to talk. This is still a free country you know."

"Says who," says Del.

"Hang a Uey," I tell Vjay. I'm looking out the window this way and that.

Because there's nothing north of where we are now, just the big estates of Atherton and horsy villas hidden along the back roads of Woodside. There's money, but you'd never get at it.

"Huh," Vjay grunts, and shuts up.

So we turn around and head back where we came from.

We reach the outskirts of Palo Alto and I reach in and tug from the glove compartment the ski masks we'd bought this afternoon at Any Mountain. We pull ours on but Vjay fumbles with his at the stoplight. Vjay reaches for the dome light but Del slaps his hand. "Do it in the damn dark," he tells him. "You want everybody seeing us?"

There's a place you go, mentally.

A defilade of imagination outside of which nothing can touch you. Where only success exists. Someplace cool and serene in an alpha state—lights are streaming past. "Slow the fuck down," Del hisses.

The masks itch. They're blue wool, and I pull mine up so I can breathe. Vjay spots me and Del tells him not to fuck with it. We're back into Mountain View and I'm not all that familiar with down here, these back streets that merge into twisty little Sunnyvale. But it sure seems to be the only thing left. We pass Mancini Motors with its enormous turquoise globe on its blue pylon and I say, "Okay," and Vjay pulls into the parking lot across Castro Avenue. He rolls slowly over the asphalt to a dark area where there are no cars, all three of us looking this way and that. He turns off the ignition and douses the lights and we continue to sit here, all three of us breathing out the blowholes of our masks.

"What do you think?" Del whispers.



"Let's just sit here a minute," I say.

"I don't like it."

"Shut up," we both tell Vjay.

"Looks okay to me," Del whispers after a couple minutes.

We're parked in the shadows away from the front of the U-Save. A bright fan of light streams across the lot from the front door, so we're parked at an angle away from that light. I can't see anybody inside but there has to be somebody.

"I want to go in," Vjay says finally. You can tell from his voice he's been thinking about it all during our sitting here.

Del says slowly, "I don't believe it."

Vjay doesn't say anything.

"I do not fucking believe it," Del says again.

"Come on," I say.

Del reaches past me and punches the glove compartment button and withdraws the pistol. It's bright chrome, seeming even brighter in the security lights of the store. He pulls gloves on then wipes the gun down again with the hem of his sweatshirt.

"I don't want to be the driver anymore," Vjay says in a low tone. "I want to be one of you who gets to go inside. I don't want to be left out here in the car."

"I believe this was already settled," Del says in a slow settled tone. "Resolved. You wanted to drive so you're doing the driving."

"What if something happens?"

"Nothing's gonna happen."

"What if something happens inside? And I'm stuck out here waiting for you?"

"What're you," Del says slowly, "scared?"

"Knock it off," I tell Del.

"Then it happens," Del informs Vjay. "But you wait till we come out. No matter what happens you wait right here."

"Don't leave me out here alone," Vjay says in a low sort of moan.

My eyes meet Del's in the reaview.

"All right." I sigh. But I don't like it.

Del doesn't answer, just looks at his watch. We're aiming for as close to closing as possible, two a.m. in the morning. Who buys their liquor at two a.m. in the morning? I check my own. Vjay doesn't have a watch, he wasn't going to need one.

Now Del's watching out the righthand windows for any cop cars.

A car goes by in a cone of yellow headlights. Sprinklers whoosh abruptly on.

El Camino Real, I'm sitting here thinking. Trying not to think. Make your mind a large blank space where only good things happen. Think it, and they will.

The King's Highway. There's a historical plaque on the sidewalk pointing out this used to be State Highway Number 1 before it became the El Camino and the Mancini globe is from the Chrysler Exhibit of the 1939 World's Fair. Quite a history. Before that, Padre Serra's supposed to have tromped through here something like three hundred years ago, when nothing else was here. Except Indians of course. Dead Indians now.

"Look," Del says in a strained attempt at reasonableness, "we aren't going to change plans now. Besides, Mike's more familiar with the gun."

I feel myself yanked rudely back to the present.

"What happens if we got stopped and I'm driving?" Vjay complains, "I'm the one's got the warrants out, what happens if we get stopped? And they run a check, and I'm the—"

"For a parking ticket?" Del sounds incredulous.

"We're not going to get stopped," I say. "And if we do, we're all in this thing together."

Vjay stares broodily out his window.

"I bet I know," Del says. "It's his girl friend."

"Shut up," says Vjay.

"She's got him whipped."

"Shutup about her. What do you know about girls?"

"Nothing," Del says. His eyes are dark as the pressurized waste that lies at the bottom of the sea. "And I don't expect to neither."



A car pulls into the lot. A man and woman tumble out, falling all over each other on their way towards the silver glass doors. Because they're reflective, we can't see what the couple's doing inside. Vjay sticks his head out the window like he's going to yell something and Del yanks him back inside by the collar, his face livid. "Stinking yellow bastard, you're trying to blow it for us, aren't you!"

Vjay doesn't say anything. All the blood has left his face. His lips are pinched together and he's trying to look brave. A car speeds by and all three of us duck reflexively and Del shoves the pistol into his belt. Vjay is hunched.

"Remember," Del tells me, "start the engine. Have it running for when we come out. If it seems like it's taking a long time or it seems like something's happening, I don't care. I want you here, sitting here with the engine running. I want this car right here waiting for when we come out. Leave the lights off but the engine running."

It's a lot for him to say and I can tell by the tension in his voice. So I just nod and don't say anything. I'll be here.

Del claps his gloved hands with a smothered smack, and he and Vjay open their doors and break into a trot, two shadows across the lot. Now they're in the light. I watch them pause at the door then Del shoves Vjay ahead of him inside.

I watch the empty herringbone of parking slots and the front doors.

I can't see anything. I can't see the cash registers or anything because the doors are silvered. Maybe I should move the car. No, better not. Well hell, I breathe. The nervousness of moments ago is gone. I jiggle my shoulders. I look in the mirror and two masked eyes look out at—

There's a loud crash and then another enormous one that I can feel even out here in the car. The lights go out and it's about ten seconds before they come flickering on again. There's a red something smeared on the inside of the front entrance door. It hadn't been there before the lights went out. I feel gooseprickles rise on my skin. What does it mean? The instinct to get out and take a look is so strong. Because the line of sight is blocked off. But I sit here. A car pulls into the lot.

It squeals to a stop. It has a whip antenna and a dashboard domelight and then there are two more cars behind them and then an ambulance. I tear the mask off and shove it into the glove compartment. Hands clutching the steering wheel, I sit here watching. At the lights and all the rest of it, I sit here watching. Waiting and watching and waiting. As we'd agreed.

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Los Altos Hills 1967
Berkeley 1969



