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Fading the World to Black

When I arrived at the construction site again last Thursday—to ensure work hadn't resumed without me—I had no idea I would run into Flem. He and I worked as grunts humping steel I-beams until the contractor squandered the project money months back and we were laid off.

Flem scooted from a stack of plywood left for ruin and made his way toward my pickup, placed both hands on the driver's side door.

"About damn time, Dale," he said. "I got us a plan to hit it rich. Nothing illegal." He lifted his hands, turned them front to back. "Pristine."

I gave his calloused hands a once over before reaching for my thermos. The morning clouds lingered like dark bruises, and Gretchen probably watched the same floaters from our kitchen waiting on my return with the infants' Tylenol.

"Any word about starting here again?"

"Hell," he said, "boss man's getting a trial, prison, hopefully a raping. Say can you work a camera?"

I nodded.

"Good, grab what you need and come on."

"Hold up, Gretchen and the baby's sick and—"

"We'll drop by there unless you're good on money."

Flem had me. I was tired of not being able to snip the umbilical cord of government cheese and rice. And as long as his idea wasn't stealing or drug peddling, what could it hurt?

As soon as I got into his truck, he grabbed a hand-held police scanner off the seat, pressed a button. Immediately, a dispatcher radioed about a possible breaking and entering, then another about a domestic dispute, each coming from within the Sterling Heights area.

"Yesterday," Flem said, "I was first on the scene of a utility worker being electrocuted."

"Did they die?"

"Hell yes they died. When I got there the guy hung from a power pole, still smoking, charred like a pig in a blanket."

"Jesus Christ."

"I know." Flem pushed a camera across the seat. "No matter what always get out and take pictures, even if it's only a fat guy stretching a penny."

I lifted my Towlson Construction cap, ran a hand through my thinning hair, and slipped the cap back down. I fumbled with the camera; it wasn't heavy. "How's this gonna make us money?"

"Listen," he said. "Celebrity chasers get rich following people. We're

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doing the same except we're taking pictures of accidents, bad decisions, the unfortunates. Afterward we'll call those news places, sell to the highest bidder."

"And what do you need me for again?"

"So I can focus on being the getaway driver while someone else gets their hands dirty."

I wanted to tell Flem that his idea was crazy, that it wouldn't work, that nobody sought to pay hard earned money for pictures of people in a state of grief or all torn up, unless it was a celebrity. Not to mention, the only person I felt comfortable seeing in compromised positions was my wife, and sometimes I didn't even feel comfortable with that.

We turned onto Ironstone Drive, got a mile or so from my place, when another call went out. The dispatcher mentioned a possible homicide on 17-Mile Road.

"Shit," Flem said. "That's real close."

I could see the brown lawn and rusted swing set at my place when he did a U-turn. "Can we drop the baby medicine off first?"

"Hell no," he said. "We only have a few minutes to get there before the police do."

Flem sat up on the wheel; we passed station wagons and Amish buggies, a school bus. Along 17-Mile, a scrawny girl in a tattered dress stood in the ditch, shin-deep in water. She squatted and worked a poplar branch into the mouth of a culvert.

"Bingo," Flem said. "I'll keep the truck running while you get out and snap pictures. When the sirens get within earshot, we'll roll out of here."

I slipped the camera around my neck and stepped out. A van slowed and a bearded man spat from the window. I turned toward Flem. He flailed his arms, hit the horn. The girl was on her knees now, fiddling with whatever she'd found.

I waded into the chest-high grass toward the girl. She looked no older than ten, and the water had turned the lower half of her dress green. When I reached the water's edge, she stood.

"He's been kilt," she said, and wiped her hands on her dress.

A nude body floated at her feet, facedown.

"Come on, get away from it," I said.

"Why?" she said, and bent down again, took hold of an arm. She grunted and shifted her feet, trying to flip the body.

Flem laid on the horn while the girl struggled, and more vehicles swung in behind his pickup and people had gotten out of their cars. Off in the distance, the faint sound of sirens wailed.

As I positioned the camera to capture the girl wrestling an arm, she turned the body over. It was a male, maybe mid-20s, with a quarter-size bullet hole in his forehead.

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"Let him be."

She ignored me and continued to tug on the body. Then she lost balance and fell and the man floated into her arms. She became frantic and kicked at his head. Now, the sirens screamed and Flem revved the truck, spun onto the highway.

The girl thrashed until the man no longer touched her. She shimmed up the bank, leaned her head back. I moved through the ankle deep sludge, dropped the camera, and lay beside her.

"My daddy left us," she said, "'cause me and mama ate too much."

"Things'll get better," I said, and took her hand; we stayed, with fingers entwined and our thin necks against the bank, until the corpse was dragged from the water, until an investigator, with a mustard stain on his white button-down, shook the change in his pocket and told us to let go.