

Eric's Towing

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Then, yesterday, after eighteen months of nothing, a call. When he picked up, the voice was different.

“Hi Lester.”

Each time the phone rang felt like the last time anyone would reach him on a working number. So he listened. She spoke like she was leaving a message and he let her.

“Tomorrow. A restaurant. My treat.”

She told him the name of the restaurant, in downtown Seattle, and the time. The place was, as far as he knew, semi-private. Not for walk-ins, though he’d never tried. He stayed with the phone by his ear after she was gone, trying to get her exact wording into his mind.

Aside from his landlord and people at the grocery store and on the way to and from, she would be the first person he’d seen since the last time he’d seen her, on what he’d come to consider his last-ever night in Seattle.

So he closed out his apartment in Tacoma. He hoarded all that time’s worth of sauce-sticky Asian Slim Selects boxes into thirty XL black plastic trash bags and hauled them down to the dumpster in the back courtyard, past a dog and a puppy.

Back inside, hands wet with what’d come through the bags, he prepared to scrub his knife in the sink. It’d been his main utensil here, dirty with the remains of everything he’d tried to eat.

He filled the sink with hot water and bubbled remnants of dish soap. Dipping the knife in, he let it go. He stepped back, short of breath, and pushed his attention down into his feet, planted on the ground, trying not to fall backward with further recoil. He thought about all the superstars who were into Transcendental Meditation and wondered what it was.

Then he heaved forward and reached back into the sink, under and around in the white, until his fingers touched it. They recoiled again. There came to him an ancient prohibition, from his childhood or before, against losing track of a knife down where it cannot be seen.

Lester got confused. The soap bubbles in the water convinced him it was boiling, all the more reason not to put his hands back in there.

So he said goodbye to his knife. He imagined it slipping down the drain, flaking off into pipe coating when the acid reached it.

Forearm hair slicked down with sink water, he gathered up the \$35 he had left from the Seattle episode of *Ghost Daddy*, which he and Michelle had both had small parts in the reshoots of two years ago, because the original actors had been unable to return.

Just before leaving, he brushed his teeth with warm water to celebrate the end of confinement, which he hadn't been sure would come. In the hall outside, he checked to make sure his door was locked, feeling for a moment like someone else trying to break in. Then he put the key under the mat. The security deposit – he wasn't getting that back anyway.

He was on the road, glad for the car that was still his and still worked, though he'd barely driven it in more than a year.

Getting up to speed on the highway, he tried saying, "Goodbye, Tacoma." It came out like *Goodbye* was the town, *Tacoma* the state, printed on a sign up ahead with the distance beside it.

He listened to himself add, "He will emerge into the city at night, an unwrapped mummy still good inside." He growled it, purred it, drawled it, narrating the trailer.

"Heeeeeeeeeee's back!!!" he shouted a moment later, recutting the trailer for overseas.

Crunching an unexploded toothpaste crystal, he watched the northbound trucks. In their light, he saw his reemergence as the first step toward something else, the route precarious but laid out before him.

“He’s streamlined his mind and firmed his body into that of a better man,” he went on, “through the bottom and onto the other side.”

His voice had to get lower and richer.

He stopped at a gas station. He breathed and straightened his veins to wash them through with clean blood. Truckers lingered among the pumps, watching him with mouths propped on immense cans of Red Bull.

The outer Seattle exits.

The drive had been comically short, after all this time. Already the months in that apartment were cordoned off; it was a time and place he would never deal with again.

Downtown.

“Here begins the hunt.” He was doing his old Kenyan safari voice, scanning the dusk for curbside parking.

The buildings gleamed in the almost-rain.

“He left in a fog,” doing noir now, or video game noir. “And in a fog he returns.”

He circled the blocks around the restaurant, nosing up drive-ways and doubling back, catching the harbor at angles, Mt. Rainier and the islands about to fade.

Some other cars joined his in trying to park, inching forward with the tentative hurry of children needing badly to pee.

It got wet enough to be raining. With his wipers on, he turned into a pay lot near the restaurant, scowling, scraping at his nose. He got out. The city felt hunkered down, in remission.

“He’s about to get treated to dinner, and drinks during, and dessert, and drinks after,” he said, explaining why shelling out for parking wasn’t about to ruin him, though it would mean no more gas.

As soon as he stood up and touched the concrete of the lot, he could tell there’d never been a question of parking somewhere else.

He'd always had instincts.

A big Caribbean guy held out a hand, took Lester's ten, dried it on the underside of his poncho, and handed over a ticket, nodding derisively, like he'd just sized Lester up and was barely letting him by.

He nodded over at the car and asked, "That your car?"

Lester was taken aback. "Yeah. I just got out of it."

There were only a couple of others, parked way in the back.

The guy scrutinized him some more. "Why you taken aback?"

You got something going on?"

Lester didn't say anything.

"So I ask again, like this: that your car?"

Lester didn't feel like answering.

So the guy read off the license plate number and asked, "That your license plate number?"

Lester nodded reflexively and wished he hadn't, felt somehow coerced. This went on for a while, the guy asking again and again. Each of them wondered if it would turn into a fight.

"Okay, man," the guy said, and Lester flinched. "Well, you coming back to pick it up?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Because it's not overnight parking."

"I know."

"So you be back?"

"Yeah, I just said so."

"Because you can't sleep in your car here, or anywhere near it. Don't matter who you are. You gonna have to move. You understand what I'm saying?"

The guy looked like he wasn't sure Lester could.

"I won't sleep anywhere, okay?"

"Man's gotta sleep," the guy said, on the verge of reassessing Lester's basic soundness yet again. "Just, like I say and I hope you get it, not here."

Lester put the claim ticket in his back pocket under his wallet.

He hurried around to the front of the block, reminiscent of how he'd always pictured London, even as a kid growing up in Spokane, and then at acting school, drunk out of his mind outside of Boise.

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"Yes?" asked the hostess.

Hefting his car keys in one hand and adjusting his boxers through his pocket with the other, he looked the place over and said, "I'm meeting someone."

He pointed her out. Michelle sat alone at a corner table, face lit by her phone. She looked at him and then away, cracking open a bound stack of papers and assuming a pose like she'd gotten here early just to sit there like that.

Lester stood by the hostess watching Michelle, and felt someone watching him. Someone had clicked on a timer.

Then Lester was at her table and the hostess was gone. Michelle took her phone out of the napkin where it'd been swaddled, pressed it and waited, then put it in her purse along with the papers.

She and Lester were face-to-face, he standing there dripping from outside, she in her rubbery or plasticky black dress, just as he remembered her, or not just. For a moment he'd been sure; now he wasn't.

He looked down at her purse on the floor, near her shiny leather boots, and remembered his own feet in their rubber sandals, caked with dirt and stiff with driving. They felt almost rusty. They longed to reach out and touch her purse, maybe dip inside.

He sat down.

"Before you say anything," she said, "I'm going to talk until we're no longer in the very first stage of this. You don't have to listen."

He made an expression like he would listen. She was talking about a screenplay that people were into, how she'd just started it but already feared the worst. "So it comes down to jealousy, greed,

privacy, the agony of change. The awareness of death without the more religious element, which I think it's saying is the only real way to ... ”

Lester nodded. Nearly spoke.

She lowered her greened-out eyelids. “What, Lester?”

“You called me back here, right? After everything, I mean, the whole, before. I won't ask why, but ... well, no, I truly won't ask.”

The waitress was standing there, listening. She had a glass of white wine on her tray that kept almost falling off.

“The city's the same, only not,” said Michelle, tipping her wine-glass side to side. She must've ordered a while ago. “Since you've been gone. Nothing about it is different per se. It's just that, certain things are going on while others have stopped. I feel I've been here a long time, but not quite as myself. It has something to do with when we were together, and what happened, though not directly. My weekends have taken a turn ... ”

Lester nodded, knowing, in a way, what she meant. He was getting back his feel for the language. He knew the last eighteen months must've had some effect on her, though he wasn't certain he could tell what or that she would tell him.

Her expressions kept missing him, like she was trying to relay information to someone standing behind. By the time his beer arrived, he was starting to crawl. He was ready to drive with her through the rain and out to the white city he'd envisioned while locked in that apartment in Tacoma, some elegant sprawl laced with all the good he'd ever wished for the two of them. He imagined his car keys were the keys to their home there.

“The career thing's going well, actually, you know in certain venues and so forth, online, but I can't help feeling ... ” She reached under the table and again checked her purse. Lester watched the top of her head, the tan triangle of exposed scalp toward the back she'd been so concerned with hiding in their early days of trying out for parts together.

“It's nothing I want to get into. It's just, it's like I'm in an exhibit

room, the one we sat in for so long in Paris, and I'm looking at that giant Kiefer on the fourth floor, and it's still where it's always been, but then, right under my nose, the other paintings start to move, being swapped out or put into storage, or stolen, and now I'm sitting in this mostly empty room not even knowing that it's empty, like I'm the one there's something wrong with."

She looked up, less composed than before, like she wanted to make sure he was still here. There were always new drugs in the city; it wasn't easy to keep up on the warning signs. He looked her over as carefully as he could, intent on not missing it if some salvageable part of her was asking for help.

"And then these sounds behind the walls come," she went on, speeding up under his heavy attention, "and there's this burning in my body as I realize that all kinds of things that I hadn't thought were doors are doors, and now these huge shapes are moving in, and there's like one last thing I can do, and after that it won't be up to me."

He leaned into his hands, into a nest of images of holding cells rattling in the shanks of volcanoes and knights breaking free to surge up in transports of fire and ash.

"I miss just talking like this, Lester. But I hope it's clear why it couldn't, why we can't ..."

She was dancing around a name.

His third beer came. "Have we eaten?" He hoped the answer was no because he could use some food, or some more food.

He said, "I dissolved my knife today."

"It's too late for that," she replied. He couldn't tell if she'd heard what he said, but he knew better than to try repeating it.

She pouted. He could tell she'd been practicing. Something about her cheeks looked, if not bruised, slushed and touched up.

She was back in the purse, fingers working under the black leather. Then she took her lip balm out of a side pouch, puckered her lips, smacked them, and said, "So I've sort of gotten into a thing with this guy."

Lester had been bracing for it.

“I can’t say too much, just that, some things about it have been great. There is, for one thing, a kind of frontier, art-wise, involved, that I’d never been able to consider before. And money.” She held up her purse, stretching it open so Lester could see the envelope inside, stuffed thick.

She paused, then added, and he knew it’d be the last thing, “And, Lester, I wanted to say, since you’re here and I don’t know when you necessarily will be again, that he might have a little thing, if you’re interested, for you too. I could bring you up later tonight.”

When she got up, she picked her purse off the ground and placed it on her seat, looking from it to Lester and back, and back. She primped it until it sat nicely.

Then she was gone.

The waitress cleared her place.

All the other tables had young couples, some just starting out and others seeking closure. Through the window behind the purse, Lester could see a roped-off line outside a nightclub, some of the people in costumes and others just dressed up. The line doubled before his eyes, then doubled again, and again, and he had to look away.

He clamped his eyes on the purse.

He looked at it sitting across from him, in her place, full not only of money but of messages, and notes and keys and tubes or vials of makeup and tiny mirrors and forms of birth control against a future clawing its way out of eggs made of sewn skin, summoned from caves deep beneath the Arabian Desert. Years which, years ago, had seemed to be coming too fast for the two of them.

A kind of juggernaut felt born in Lester’s stem. It groaned and snarled, uncoupling chain. He tore through the hesitation that wanted to coat his body in mold, into the restaurant’s surge, belting out profanities, bumping hard into waitresses, clutching something hard to his chest.

“Look at my wrists,” he panted, “and the bubbles of soap that

percolate around the veins.” He showed them off to the bathroom mirror, unshackled, only just beginning to see where he was.

“I’m boiling!” It felt good to scream.

He stood boiling in the corner, by the big metal trashcan, looking at the dicks on the walls. He tried to remember what it was he’d come here to do, and what, now, he wanted to do.

Someone pounded on the door. “The fuck? You giving birth in there?” The sound pried him out. Michelle’s purse filled his eyes.

The pounding went on. He kicked it against one wall and leaned flat against the other, feeling its wetness through his shirt.

“So I’ve gotten you alone,” he told the purse. For a few good minutes, they lived in here together, good as any bedroom in the promised white city.

Then he began to plot their escape. He rehearsed how it’d go, shuffling around the bathroom, feinting and creeping on his haunches and toes. The door rattled again and he whipped it open so fast whoever had been banging fell all the way inside, past him.

On through the restaurant now, behind the swaying waitress, past the table where he’d been with Michelle.

He burst through the doors, past the hostess and the bouncer.

Rain digging him a hairline, he waited for someone to run after him, and for what would ensue. He tore around the back of a convention center, hid for a while, then looped around to the pay lot.

He found the Caribbean guy leaning against a pole, holding a pamphlet or novella, shielding it from the rain with one hand like a lighter.

Lester was all the way upon him before he looked up. For a moment they regarded each other like they’d both just arrived at an empty track at a foreign train station, and could not determine if they were early or late.

“Where’s my car?” volunteered Lester.

“Towed,” said the guy, chewing his cheek and wincing.

“What?”

“Towed.”

“Why?”

The guy shrugged, spilling the question off his poncho.

“You took my ten bucks, no?”

“Yes.”

“So I was parked legally?”

“Uh-huh.” Instead of looking at Lester, the guy was now riveted on a fence that sloped down a hill into a kind of trash river.

“So why’d it get towed?”

“Eric towed it.”

“Eric?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” Lester asked again, feeling the purse grow heavy with rain.

“He saw your car, man.”

“Eric saw my car?”

“Eric like *really* saw your car, if you know what I’m saying.” He leaned way in and whispered so that Lester was rocked by a gust of cologne. “He looked inside it and saw his chance.”

“Can I get it back?”

The guy waved goodbye and hailed a taxi in one grandiose motion. “This is Saturday night,” he shouted from the window, “and everyone, I mean *everyone*, is gotta have a good time!”

Lester patted himself down to make sure he still had his keys, for whatever that was worth. His lips were whispering, dripping water.

The guy had left his little book in a puddle. He picked it up and peeled mealy pulp away from a number dissolving in a bath of blue ink. The pages were standard ruled, most blank, some with sketches.

He opened Michelle’s phone and, tying off the desire to read everything on it, dialed the number from the pad. It came up as “Eric Operator.”

A very slow voice answered after a few rings, a woman who left huge spaces between words.

“Hey,” Lester replied, kind of guilty and giddy, as if he were soliciting a favor. “I’m looking for my car.”

“Oh yeah?”

Tell me about it, baby, it sounded like she said. Warmth was starting to take shape in the damp of his pants.

“Yeah, they say Eric towed it.”

Oh do they? Who says that, baby? Who did this to you at school today, Little Willie?

They stalled for a while. “They say that Eric ... saw my car.”

“That he saw it?” she asked. “Uh-huh. And wanted to have it.” “He wanted *me* to have it?”

“No,” Lester reached into his pocket and tried to adjust. “No, *he* wanted to have it. Like him, himself.”

“Oh, in that case, I wonder which Eric it is that you mean.”

Her tone had cooled by at least ten degrees, and dried down to jerky.

He could see himself standing at the bottom of an apartment complex that reached deep into the sky, begging some raving widow on the top floor to buzz him in.

He almost hung up before she told him the address.

3

“So how long since you don’t been to Seattle?” the driver asked, covered in what looked like rain but smelled like sweat.

Lester didn’t answer, not even inwardly.

The driver kept looking at him, shaking his head, nearly forgetting the road. He came to a puddle-spraying halt.

Lester hesitated.

The driver shined a flashlight at him and barked, “What, you gonna get out of the cab or am I?”

Lester got out. He took a twenty from Michelle's purse and forked it over.

"What no tip?" the driver scowled. Lester peeled off another twenty and forked that over too.

He rang a doorbell that was up a few steps from the street. The shapes of skyscrapers were visible in every direction, through the watery air, but weren't exactly nearby. His vantage here was that of looking up from a pit.

He rang the doorbell again, peering over the fence that extended away from the door, bounding a sea of slick black forms.

The door opened onto a man in a suit.

"I'm here to see Eric," said Lester, belting it out like he knew what it meant.

"You better wash up," the man said.

He showed Lester to a door. In the bathroom, which was so bright it hurt his forehead, a man in a white undershirt and no pants masturbated frantically into a urinal in the corner while four other men in business suits with fedoras leaned against the wall, looking tired as they read newspapers draped over their arms.

"What is it, 1939?" asked Lester.

One of the businessmen checked his watch. The masturbating man asked if he could take a break and the businessman checked his watch again.

The other urinals were mounted on the wall at about shoulder height, one near the door, the rest further back, draped in plastic. It seemed possible that each contained a smiling shrunken head, bedded down in wire mesh, a mothball in its mouth like an apple in a Christmas ham.

Another businessman looked at Lester. Folding his paper, he clapped a hand on his shoulder and led him back out the door, warning the masturbating man not to stop.

They went up and down hallways until he was suitably shaken.

A nurse handed him a key, crisply announcing that his room was ready. She took him by the hand, down more hallways, to what looked like an outdoor motel that'd been built indoors, rows of doors with awnings overhanging and parking spots drawn onto the carpet, big piles of dirt with palm trees propped in them and some parked motorcycles.

She left him near a door with a pair of teal pajama bottoms and a matching top in his hands, telling him to change.

Before he could get the door open, a tall man in overalls and a cowboy hat loomed up behind him, turning off the lights with one hand and touching Lester's shoulder with the other.

"Name's Ebb. Live next door," he whispered, in a sludgy Western accent. "Just fired up some porn." He said it like it was a pot he'd put on the stove.

"How's about it? You and me, George." He took out a knife and gently tapped the side of his head.

Lester lunged into his room, pushing the TV and a La-Z-Boy against the door. The TV burst alive, a girl in a van with three construction workers. She had on a very thin latex mask molded into the face of another girl, or perhaps a facsimile of her actual face, underneath, though her body skin was a few shades lighter.

She had a tattoo across the top of her back, bold lines and colors, but she squirmed in such a way that he couldn't read it.

He sat on the floor in a spread of teal pajamas, mesmerized though his heart was still pounding. He pictured the actress stepping out of the van, taking notes from the director, chewing a Tic Tac under the latex, then getting back in when an assistant hoisted open the door for the next take.

"But it's not her," he whispered, afraid he would hear.

Still, the dream of rescue flickered up from down in him. Maybe he could find her. He started toward the bathroom, where he would wash his face, clean his veins again, summon the ...

The floor started to rumble. Plaster flaked down from the ceiling.

People flew through the walls, naked and pushed through from behind, sweaty heads appearing with hats of torn wallpaper. He heard a crash from the bathroom and the shower exploded.

He had to knock down his barricade and flee the room before it flooded completely. Outside, he found Ebb sitting in a lawn chair, knife stuck in the carpet next to his foot. The lights had come back on.

He handed Lester an envelope. Inside was a certificate that said PORN WARRANT in gold letters.

“Means I can come into your room any time I please, for any old reason.” Then he made a motion summoning it back.

Someone tazed him.

When Lester came to, he was in the teal pajamas. His wet sandals were back, or still, on his feet, and the purse was propped on a chair near where he lay.

He sat up, eyeing its opening to see if everything, or anything, was still there. It looked to be.

Pillars of steam came in from the sides.

Standing, he found the ground soft, strewn with sand and fern fronds. Statues of women surrounded him, one of which appeared to be Michelle, though rendered generically. He went up to it, studying its face and neck, and then felt someone behind him.

His back clenched and folded in, ready to be tazed again.

When the pain didn't come, he turned around.

“Face-to-face with Eric,” said Eric, his breath minty with the mint of chewing tobacco. He had a narrow reddish goatee and teeth of a similar color, and wore round purple sunglasses.

He stared close at Lester. “I know you.” He had, or was doing, an old radio voice.

Lester waited for him to go on.

“You're a little bit of a lucky man,” Eric went on. “To have made it out of all that and into all this. Very rare.”

He pulled his hair off his shoulders and stretched to show off twin tattoo cobras that ran around his forearms and wrists, into spitting heads on his palms.

“It breathes fire,” breathed Eric, into Lester’s face, then laughed and shuddered, elbowing Lester’s solar plexus. “Ach, it lumbered across my grave,” he laughed, shuddering again. “Get us a beer from the fridge.”

Lester got up and opened a fridge in the corner. It was mostly full of ferns, with a few beers wedged in.

“They’re twist-off,” said Eric.

“Well, cheers.” Lester twisted and sipped.

“To what?” Eric asked.

“To something moving tonight,” said Lester, hearing more authority in his voice than he’d expected to.

“I’ll drink to that. Like what, moving?”

Lester brought it up. “Like my car. It got towed.”

“By me?” Eric peered into his bottle.

“Yes. So I’m told.”

“Could be.”

“Why?”

“You parked in a tow-away zone.”

“No I didn’t.”

Eric laughed. “Apparently you did. You got towed away.”

Lester tried to decide. “You could say that.”

“Well, why’d you do it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes you do,” said Eric, speaking as he swallowed. “I might be able to help you. Maybe, maybe not.”

“What did she tell you about me?” Lester asked, but Eric was out of the room, through a back door, across a porch that seemed about to fall off. Lester followed into a kind of meadow, fireflies sparking in imitation of UFOs.

They were walking among fields of parked cars and tractors and flatbeds, huge lawnmowers and woodworking tools, and cages, mostly empty.

The shapes of the city buildings were even vaguer than before, specters in the stormy distance.

All around them creaked piles of telescopes and globes, their paper maps peeling off and floating like flags. A few gypsies in long dresses and fur hats worshipped in a pond, shaking rattles.

Convex cemetery walls ringed the perimeter, stuffed with drawers. A van at the bottom of an incline rattled with fierce inner life. This caught Lester's eye, set him to wondering if it was the source of the feed he'd watched in his room. He waited for the masked girl to get out, pulling a white robe over that big tattoo across her shoulders.

Then they'd walked past it. "You just take all this stuff?" he asked, more cars coming into view in the trampled grass, like a parking lot at a county fair.

"You can have anything you want," said Eric. "If you have a place for it. My cinema is unbounded."

Then he laughed in a new way. "I don't know if I truly believe in Eric's Towing. But I know that things come to me. I've seen it happen." He gestured across his domain. "Things not staked down, under battened hatches," he scratched at his jawbone, "are wont to roll."

He rubbed the two cobra heads on his palms together and groaned like they were spitting. He wiped his hands on his pants.

Holding the purse under one arm, Lester waited for his car to be revealed. After a while, he started pointing wherever his finger would go, insisting that each was his. "That's my car!" he'd shout, pointing at a crushed Mazda convertible. "That's my car!" he'd shout again, pointing at a Jetta or a Honda Civic with no doors and no wheels.

Eric nodded each time. They were getting along.

Finally, he handed Lester a pair of keys. A few paces later, he asked, "Do you have the keys?"

“Yeah,” replied Lester, holding them up, while feeling his old keys in his pocket.

“Good. Let’s get in.”

Lester clicked the UNLOCK button on the new keychain, and a nearby Hyundai beeped and flashed red. They walked over to it. It looked to be in decent shape except for the hacked-away lid of its trunk.

He got in the driver’s side, settled Michelle’s purse down by his feet, and reached across to open the passenger door for Eric.

“You good to drive?” asked Eric, fastening his seatbelt.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know, maybe you’re a drunk or have recently taken something or are in the grip of a waking nightmare. A watery cocktail of delusion and paranoia, perched on a plank wide enough for one foot but not for two.” There was sympathy in the way he said it, for Lester and the long night he’d had, and would have.

Lester claimed to be fine.

As they rolled out through a hole in the fence, Eric loosened his shoes and told Lester he’d brought an extra passport. “Some joker who auditioned for me,” he said. “It’ll work for you.”

4

They were back on the streets, Seattle at one A.M. Lester did feel a little stoned now, the back of his throat numb like after dental work.

Eric was looking out his window, fingers on the radio, never stopping long enough to hear what was playing. The purse heaved again, a low growl, probably Michelle calling her phone from someone else’s, trying to get her life in order before dawn.

“You want me to leave the city?” he asked, as signs for the highway came into view. He resolved, for now, to go as far as this took him. There wasn’t exactly an alignment of good stars smiling down on his prospects in Seattle, nor anything left in Tacoma.

Lester got on the highway, following signs north toward Vancouver. They passed the entrance to 90 East, toward Spokane, and he thought for a moment about veering back home, looking up old friends, getting a job in his old high school's drama department. The reverie petered out on a lawn chair under some bridge that, as far as he remembered, wasn't actually in Spokane.

The highway went through its outskirt stages, tunnels and bridges, rotaries, pastures of open parking spots, the visible streets on either side deserted except for teenagers dragging plastic rings that'd once bound six-packs.

Beyond the airport, they fell to speeding past outlet stores, surrounded by neon-lit trucks that made him yawn.

It got to be hours.

The Canadian border station was already a while back, so uneventful that Lester kept thinking it was still to come.

His eyes burned with long stretches of dark through country whose daytime features he could not imagine. He got a little choked up at the thought.

"I could turn us around right now," he whispered, seeing if Eric would stir. A hundred miles later, he whispered it again, like it hadn't been true before but now it was.

The longer he didn't, the more he got to picturing what lay ahead, maybe the city he'd been looking for, or a field he could rile into a kingdom with the money in Michelle's purse. Once he was armed, he'd parcel the surrounding countryside into timeshares and fiefs.

The car had found a way to move through space with no contact on any side, like those Soviet sensory deprivation tortures he'd read about. Deer and raccoons flowed through the headlights in a constant stream.

When Eric spoke again, after so long that Lester had almost forgotten he was there, he said, "Pull off."

Lester pulled off, the exit sign softly dabbed onto its background.

In the tattoo parlor, lying facedown on a sweaty leather banquette, a person, a man or a woman, worked on his back.

It hurt about as much as he'd heard it would. "You will bear the mark of your resurgence," he explained to himself, muffled by the leather.

He gripped the underside of the banquette and saw Eric sitting on a chair in the corner, smoking and running his fingers over the pages of a magazine, phone on his knee.

"Let it dry," said the man or woman after it was done, "until dawn. That means no shirt."

"Was I given an anesthetic?" Lester asked, waddling in his teal pajama bottoms.

"Coffee," said Eric. "And donuts."

It came in a pink cardboard box, the standard half-dozen, and two big Styrofoam cups without lids, instant creamer. The place was empty except for an old woman hooked up to a respirator at one table, two cops conferring over a phone book at another, and a very thin Asian teenager with a mustache as sparse as arm hair, drinking orange juice under the muted TV.

A runaway, thought Lester.

He and Eric sat at the high counter by the window, watching the abandoned street, lit orange and blue by the CLOSED sign in the Persian rug outlet directly across.

"Is it an Eric's Towing tattoo?" he asked.

Eric smiled and rolled up his sleeve to show more cobra running toward his armpit. "Not bad skin," Lester mumbled, through lips unable to hold any usual amount of donut.

Someone started a vacuum cleaner.

"I'll get us more," said Lester. At the counter, he gazed almost lovingly at the kid on duty and saw the possibility of spending the rest of his life here, again teaching high school, holed up in a cottage on the outskirts where he'd read scripts on weekends and upload videos of himself talking.

“Let’s get gas and get drunk,” said Eric, taking a donut from the new box and leaving the rest half-crushed on the counter.

At the station, Lester walked around the car, tightrope tired, while Eric pounded can after can from a thirty pack of Molson Ice. Lester put his heel down in front of his toes, tipped forward, then alternated and repeated, while Eric drank and drank, breathing through his nose.

Then he spread his arms as far as they’d go and burped into the sky.

On they went, into the Canadian sunrise.

Lester felt newly awake, well into the chamber beyond what he would once have called the last chamber.

He felt his tattooed back stick to the fabric of the car seat.

Eric sat in the passenger seat, still drinking, wiping his cheeks and neck, and then he peed and opened the door and pushed some of it out with his foot.

Lester wondered how far Michelle’s money would go in Canada. He would need not only arms but ammunition, vehicles, structures. He would send for her, or have her found.

They drove through the day, stopping for more gas as needed, purple-lipped from soda, streaks tearing through the windshield from all the times Lester had squeegeed it dry. His teeth felt made of wax; he tried to push his tongue through.

Light spilled over the tundra. Traces appeared in the air before Lester’s eyes through the windshield, footprints recording the things that’d been there, or would come.

There were reflections stretched like bodies made of string across the horizon. The gas pedal, as Lester pushed it harder still, tangled with that string, like an antique loom. He’d woven the horizon into an army of sacral forms by the time he pulled into the passing lane and it crossed his mind that Eric might kill him.

“How did you actually tow my car?” Lester asked, as the dial approached 100. “Do you have a tow truck?”

“This here’s my car,” said Eric.

The engine started to rasp and jitter, and the emergency light bloomed up so bright and thick it was all Lester could see. He felt his back and neck turn to muscle as his hands gripped and re-gripped the wheel.

“Get out,” barked Eric.

Lester got out.

Flat tundra extended into an undotted distance.

“Am I going to die here?” Lester asked.

Eric held his purple sunglasses far out to one side as he puked on a rock.

Lester walked back to the car and took out Michelle’s purse, opened it all the way. Under his old keys there were a few tampons in paper wrappers, some Chap Stick and face cream, an address book with only first names, a keychain with keys and supermarket discount cards, a bottle of saline and other contact lens products, two vials of perfume, a makeup kit with a foldout mirror, a pack of cigarettes and two lighters, stray Q-tips, a crumpled receipt that’d lost its ink, and the script pages she’d been reading when he went in to meet her.

He looked for a long time at the blank screen of her phone, his puffy cheeks reflected into a sleek rectangle. He smelled it for a second, bit down, then put it back in the purse and yawned like a man at the very end of the world.

He tried to trace it all the way back, down the stalk to the ground and through the ground to the roots, the idea of nipping it in the bud, if it ever would have been possible, or if the roots went straight through and came raging out the other side and deep into space, and now there was no one inside or beside him to ask what could possibly still be left, what tiny far off cell he could hope to find waiting, what hole to crawl into and stay there, what people he could have any prayer of living among, or living as.

And yet, between bends in the light, maybe not in this world nor even in the next, he glimpsed a room, in a hotel in some immense city,

reserved by some agent or manager in his name, a tiny slice into the bulging exterior that was his way in, if he could just get there, holding onto the image long enough to find it, the room decked out with everything he would ever need, even a lump under a sheet that might have meant someone curled, waiting with lungs full of breath. Or, at least, a hotel phone on a desk that was just about to ring ...

And next year, tomorrow, when he got to where he was going, he would pick that phone up and deliver an ultimatum.

5

After Eric had loped away, into the blind spot between the rearview and sideview mirrors, a cop bore down on Lester, who'd climbed back into the driver's seat to wait.

"Okay," the cop began, "what can we do for you? Got something on your mind?"

He squinted at the hacked-away trunk and then at the piss smell, and then squinted harder at Lester.

Lester thought of some inanity, like "What day is it?"

But held his tongue.

The cop nodded, like, sure, he knew what this was all about, and turned to walk back to his car. Then he reappeared by Lester's window. Lester glanced in the rearview and saw that the cop's car was gone.

"Towed," he said, enjoying how it felt to say.

The cop leaned on the window, his posture different.

"Well, look here mister, do you think you could, if it's no trouble that is, give me a ride to the station?"

Lester looked through the window at him, trying to keep his eyes open. "You're asking me?"

The cop made a motion of assent.

"So then, you mean to say," Lester weighed his words. "And let me get this right, that you've resorted to hitchhiking? Cast out on the

road, with not a soul to care if you live or die?”

The cop thought it over, dust seeping over the lip of the road. A train of birds crossed the sky. Looking down from them and back at the car, he mustered his head into a nod.

“Yes sir I am. Not a dime to my name. Hardly a name to my hide. Lost the last of what was mine and can’t say I don’t know why.”

He waited to see if this obeisance would be enough. Lester took his time, marinating in it, then nodded at the passenger’s side door.

The cop let himself in, propping one foot on the other knee to minimize contact with Eric’s piss.

At the station, which had taken at least an hour to get to, Lester stood before a satellite image of all of British Columbia.

There was a rocky river dividing the northern territory from the south, a row of canyons making a mess of the topography, and it all felt familiar, like the place he knew he’d end up in.

The cop was gone. Someone else in a police uniform was giving him directions, treating the satellite image like a road map.

It was Eric.

“It’s even further north than that,” Eric was saying.

Behind the counter sat Michelle, dressed also in uniform, typing back and forth between a laptop and a desktop. Her nails were painted turquoise and were so long that, from the sound of it, her fingertips never reached the keys.

It was just the three of them in there, an Audubon Society Butterflies of Canada calendar and a digital clock set to military time on the wall, stacks of papers at rest under paperweights, everything silent but for the typing and the sighing of a fish tank.

They stood on thin brown carpeting, black in places where coffee had been spilled or mud tracked in. There was a row of heavy-duty work-boots along one wall, bookended by two small benches for putting them on.

Lester remembered that he still didn’t have a shirt, and asked

where the bathroom was. Eric smiled like no one had asked anything. He straightened his badge on his chest, looking down at his fingers.

Lester stood there, looking at the telephone on the counter and a notice on the bulletin board about a species of invasive pond algae that was clogging drains and culverts. Check all anchors before docking.

“Can you give us one second?” Michelle asked when it seemed clear that Lester wasn’t about to take a hint.

He looked from her to Eric and back, nodded.

“Thanks,” she replied, with a businesslike smile. “We’ll be right with you. We just have one item to discuss, in private. Please make yourself comfortable.”

Eric showed him to the waiting room, guiding him delicately by the shoulder.

Propping the purse on one of two chairs, Lester sat in the other and looked out at the lot behind the station where the cruisers were parked. He tried to fix his attention somewhere, fearing that if he fell asleep he would revert. A crane rose over a low building and blocked off one edge of the sky. The other edge looked open.

The fish tank bubbled, full of chubby, lazy-eyed masses.

For now, Lester bubbled along with it.

