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Shared Room on Union

THEY WERE PARKED ON UNION, IN FRONT OF HER PLACE, THEIR KNEES locked in conference around the stick shift, Janna and Justin talking, necking a little, the windows just beginning to steam. We'd better stop, she said. I should go now. It was one A.M., a Thursday night turned Friday morning. Squads of drunken students were on the town. So far nobody had passed the car. *Hey, take it to a Travelodge, man!* Nights like this, that sort of thing could happen—one time a rigid hand had rammed the hood, another time someone had smacked the passenger window a foot from her ear, Justin's fingers in her hair stopping dead.

I won't miss this part, he told her.

I really should go, Jus.

Friday was her "nightmare day," a double shift at the upscale café/bistro where she was now manager. Thursday nights she insisted on sleeping at her own place, alone. Sleep wasn't really the issue, he sensed. This seemed to be a ritual of independence, and he knew she would maintain it strictly, having declared she would, until they moved in together in the new year. Other nights of the week they slept at his place or hers. They would be moving into a storm-worn but solid Victorian redbrick bungalow, three bedrooms, hardwood floors, in a druggy neighborhood now being colonized by bohemians and young professionals. Justin and Janna were somewhere on the chart between those categories. In March they planned to fly, tongues somewhat in cheeks, to Las Vegas to get married.

These separate Thursday nights, this symbolic vestige (as he saw it), tore him up in a small way. He could never take in too much of her. He had never been in this position before—the one who loves harder and lives the risk of it. It hadn't been this way at first. Then it was this way, then it wasn't, and now it was again, but more so. This must be a good thing, he felt—this swaying of the balance of desire—and he would try to work out in his mind why it was a good thing, and the words "reciprocal" and "mutuality" would pop up from somewhere, and the idea of a "marital dance," which he thought he had probably read somewhere, yes, definitely . . . and his mind would start to drift, unable to concentrate on the matter for so long, and he would simply want her body next to his again. For now, no excess seemed possible.

Okay, he said. I know.

I'll see you tomorrow, Jus.

Great.

From somewhere the remote, tuneless roar of frat-boy singing. Possibly the sound was approaching. One of the ironies of existence in this city of life-term welfare and psychiatric cases was that the student “ghetto,” on a weekend night, could be as dangerous as any slum north of the Hub or in the wartime projects further up. She tightened her eyes and peered through the misty windshield. She had a vertical crease between her brows and it would deepen when she was tired. That one hard crease; otherwise her face was unlined.

What’s that?

The boys seemed to be receding, maybe turning south toward the lake. Then another sound—the flat tootling ring of a cell phone, as if right behind the car. Still in a loose embrace they looked back over their shoulders. Someone was there, a shadow, as if seen through frosted glass, standing by the right fender.

What? Yeah, but I can’t talk right now. Right, I’m just about to. What’s that? Yeah, I believe so.

I’d better go, she said.

I’ll walk you in.

It’s okay, she said. She didn’t move.

Call you in five minutes, the voice said in a clumsy, loud whisper. *Me you, not you me, okay?* The shadow wasn’t there by the fender. There was a rapping on the driver’s side window, a shape hulking. Justin let in the clutch and pinched the ignition key but didn’t twist. With his free hand he buffed a sort of porthole in the steam of the window. That middle-class aversion to being discourteous, even to a lurking silhouette at one in the morning.

Open it, the voice said roughly. No face visible in the porthole. Justin twisted the key.

Don’t!

Jus, he’s got something, stop!

It’s not a fake—open the fucking door. The man clapped the muzzle to the glass. Behind the pistol a face appeared: pocked and moon-colored under the sodium streetlights, eyes wide and vacated. A too-small baseball cap, hair long behind the ears, dark handlebar moustache.

Justin got out slowly, numbly, and stood beside the car, his eyes at the level of that moustache. The man put the pistol to Justin’s chest. An elongated, concave man. Some detached quarter of Justin’s mind thought of an extra in a spaghetti western—one of the dirty, stubbly, expendable ones. A hoarfrost of dried spittle on the chin.

Janna was getting out on her side, he could hear her.

Just give him the keys, Justin.

There.

And your wallet, the man said. Nice keychain. And your bag, ma’am. Come on.

Ma’am, he’d said. Justin dug for his wallet. His fingers and body trembled as though hypothermic. The night wasn’t cold—mild air was lofting up from Lake Ontario and Justin smelled the vast lake in the air, a stored summer’s

worth of heat. The pupils in the man's pale eyes were dilated with crystal meth, or coke, Justin guessed, aware again of that aloof internal observer—that scientist—though actually in his life he was impulsive to a fault, and in his work he progressed by instinctive leaps instead of careful, calibrated steps. He lacked focus but he had energy, good hunches. Two years past his PhD he was in medical research at the university, assisting in a five-year study of fetal alcohol syndrome. No shortage of study subjects in this city.

The pistol looked small to him, maybe a fake, but his knowledge of weapons was vague. He gave his wallet and then, with a sudden instinct to politeness, reached across the roof of the car and received from Janna her olive suede handbag—to pass it to the man. Janna's crease was sharply incised, her green eyes tight and stony. No plea for heroics there. She looked dazed and indignant, he didn't know at whom.

The man got into the car. Justin, as if waiting to be dismissed, stood by the door as it was pulled shut. Your door too, the man told Janna—the voice gone thinner, higher. She shoved it to, the door bouncing back open—the seatbelt buckle. Don't slam it that way! he yelled, a man now sustaining an affront to his property. She got the door closed. Frozen, Justin and Janna meshed glances over the roof. The man was trying to start the car. Something wrong there. On stiff, stilt-like legs, Justin edged around the back of the car toward Janna—Janna retreating, as if from him, though more likely toward the door of her building.

The man swung open the car door and shouted, What kind of vehicle *is* this, man?

It's a Volvo. Volvo 240.

I mean what's its *problem*? The man sprang out of the car and stood teetering by the door, across from them now, eyeing them with ice-clear but unfocused eyes. Possibly drunk as well. He flapped the pistol in the air as he talked in his breathy, squashed tenor. Justin glanced around. The streets were empty.

I don't know, Justin said. It's a standard. You don't drive standard?

His assumption that a townbilly would know how. Pickup trucks and so on. The man's brow clenched, as if at some inward struggle. Drunk too, yes.

Why didn't you *tell* me?

Well, Justin started. The word soaked up whatever breath he had.

I can't drive fucking stick!

Oh, Justin said, eyes on the wagging pistol. I'm sorry.

I hardly ever drive, the man said, quieter.

It's all right, Justin said.

Just leave the car, Janna said, monotone, a digital voice on a recording. You've got our stuff.

The man's cell phone went off like a siren.

Stay there, both of you.

The pistol aimed vaguely at the space between Justin and Janna. Justin wanted to bridge that space and at the same time move as little as possible. The man had the cell phone to his ear. Janna was rigid. She was a quick, fidgety

type—frozen that way she was not herself, a wax replica.

Right, but I said I'd call back. How's that? I don't know why the fuck the thing hasn't come, you call them back yourself! I know, I know, that's why I said don't use them anymore, didn't I? Yeah. That's right. And pineapple on just half this time, right? And don't call back. I might be longer, there's no car now. No, I don't want to now. I'll deal with it.

He jabbed the cell phone into his jacket. He looked to either side.

Into the trunk, both of yours.

What? Justin said.

The man flicked the key over the roof of the car. It slid off the near side and plinked down among the leaves and rotting oak mast along the curb.

Hurry up!

Just take our stuff, you don't need to—

Panicking, the man trained the gun on them over the roof of the car, straight-armed, both hands on the grip, a cop at a police car barricade. They might be dead in a second and the afterimage Justin would take with him into oblivion would be from prime-time television.

Open the trunk!

Okay.

I've got to fucking *walk* now.

Still thinking and seeing with weird clarity, Justin bent down for the key and as he stood up he studied the keychain in his hand. A tiny plastic bust of Elvis. A gift from her, last Valentine's Day. He walked to the trunk and opened it. This was all right, though. There would be people passing, and the trunk was spacious, as trunks go. The guy wasn't taking them into an alley and shooting them. And though Justin had forgotten his cell phone tonight, he knew that she had hers, she always did, and maybe it wasn't in her handbag now, sometimes she kept it in her jacket.

I'm not getting in there, Janna said.

Get in, the man whispered.

No, I can't, please.

Janna, please.

Stop! she hissed in a private way, straight at Justin, her eyes round with rage.

The man's skinny arm pushed her toward the trunk and she gasped. Justin, flat-palmed, shoved at the caved chest under the denim jacket—did it without thinking. The man swung the gun and the butt cracked Justin in the side of the head. He saw a screen of blue light, heard a fizzing sound like static or a can of beer being opened, as he sat back into the trunk. A sick, cold feeling, nausea in the bones, plummeted down his spinal column to his toes. Beaten, he tucked up his dead legs and curled obediently into the trunk. She was making a faint blubbering sound as she climbed in after him. No, I won't, she said as she climbed in. I can't. Please.

Get in, Justin and the man said at the same time. Now just move your foot, the man told her, his voice still quiet but in a different way, maybe appeased,

maybe appealing for a sort of understanding. The trunk was deep. It snapped closed and after a second there was a sound of steps running off. The sound-space between the strides was long and Justin had an image, projected on the sealed darkness around him, of the man loping away up Union, long arms dangling, almost simian, mouth slack and panting under the droopy moustache. In their politically civilized circle, people didn't use words like "trash" or "skag" about the distressed elements—addicts, parolees, the generationally poor—who made the city's north side seem more like a slum in Jackson, Mississippi, than part of the old limestone capital of Canada. But now in his anger the words occurred to him. And what he should have done. What he would be doing mentally for weeks to come, rewinding the scene, re-cutting it.

Fucking yokel. Cops will have him by tomorrow. Are you all right?

No. She expelled the word on a faint puff of breath. He was groping in the dark for her shoulder. He found her breast instead and she seemed to recoil, though there was no room for that. In the deeps of the trunk, furred on their sides in mirror image, they lay with knees pressed together, faces close. Her breaths, coming fast, were hot, coppery, sour.

Janna? He found her shoulder and she didn't move.

She said, Could air be running out already? I feel like it is.

No, no way. And the car's ten years old. We'll get some air in here.

I don't feel it.

Breathe slower, he said. Do you have your cell?

In my bag. It's gone. I didn't want to get in. Why did you just get in?

I didn't. You saw, he smacked me. I was out for a second. He would have shot us. My head is—

I can't be *in* here, Justin. I can't! You knew that, too. That I'm claustrophobic.

He'd never seen her this way. Even in private she was always capable, composed, professional, as though feeling herself under constant scrutiny by some ethical mentor. Too much so, he sometimes felt. How she would never miss a day's workout in the spring and summer while training for her annual triathlon, whatever the weather or her, their, schedule. How she would talk of getting "more serious" about the sport next year, maybe doing more events. Even her recreation—nights out, parties, vacations—she undertook in this same carefully gauged manner, pacing herself. Only so much fun. Only this much frivolity and no more. As if she was afraid of some tipping point.

Till now he had not let on to himself how her discipline—what he had so long lacked and craved—was coming to irk him.

I've told you I'm claustrophobic. Why didn't you tell him?

He probably wouldn't have known the word. Christ, my head.

Of course he would know it.

And I didn't *know*. I mean, I thought you were just saying that before. Everyone says they're claustrophobic.

I don't even like when you pull the quilt over us!

To make love, he thought, in an exclusive cocoon, cut off from the world.

I'm sorry, Jan, he said. The throb in his head was worsening and something was gouging into his hip. Maybe a tool? Something useful here? Of course there were no tools in his trunk. He felt the thing, an old ballpoint pen. His mouth was parched.

And I really have to pee, she said.

That's just nerves, he said. His own guts were wheeling. But it calmed him somewhat, being the one in control like this, consoler and protector.

What's that?

A car revved past, humping out a heavy rap number, the octave dropping as it receded, as if in sadness or fatigue. Justin realized that he'd shouted—both of them had shouted for help, though at the last moment somehow he had tightened the syllable to *Hey*.

You forgot your cell, didn't you? she whispered.

There'll be more cars.

They can't *hear* us, Justin. You always forget your cell! I knew it.

People'll be going by.

Not till the morning. I feel like there isn't, there won't be enough air.

Don't worry, there will.

And I *really* have to go.

She'd never sounded so much like a small girl. Or girly woman. And sometimes he'd longed for that, for a small, unshielded part of her to give itself over to his chivalry and guardianship. But this went too far. Her stomach (invisible now, though as he jabbed the LED on his watch, 1:22 A.M., he got a subaquatic glimpse of her nestled form)—her stomach had a washboard look, tanned, much harder and stronger than his own. She was crying, whimpers mixed with convulsive little intakes of breath, like a child post-tantrum. Finding her hands he held them close between their chests. The trunk seemed to be rocking slightly as if from the adrenaline thump of his pulse, their hearts together. Spending the night together after all. He'd studied murky ultrasound images of curled fetuses, and one time twins—soon to be FAS siblings—the victims of ignorant, careless, or despairing parents. Entombed in their toxic primordial sea, the two had seemed to be holding each other in a consoling embrace.

Help, help, she was calling weakly.

Another car passed, slower. Again he yelled involuntarily, aware of a swelling node of panic he was compressing under his heart.

Might have let us go if you said I was claustrophobic.

Okay, Janna. He tried to speak normally. A laryngeal whisper came out. Let me think.

I mean, he won't want us to die in here! He doesn't want to go to jail for that!

You're going to be fine, Jan.

How the fuck do *you* know if I'm going to be fine! You didn't even remember I'm claustrophobic!

Janna.

You're supposed to be a doctor!

I'm not a doctor, you know that. Jesus.

You're crushing my *hands*, Justin!

Her whine seemed to split his head. This felt like the most savage hangover—worse than the worst he had undergone in university and grad school, before he met Janna and set his life on a stabler footing. A student of booze, he had been. My years of research, he would quip.

Jesus, Janna, calm down.

Why is no one walking past? Most nights I lie there and it's, it's. It's like an endless parade of people walking past. Yahoos shouting.

Someone will. Don't worry. We'll call. I—

I just *knew* you wouldn't have your cell. How can we call if—

Shut up! I mean *call*.

This just fueled her. She wrung her hands free, panting in the tight space. No, no, you're *not* a doctor and it's lucky. You've got no—no—you can never just be *together*, can you, Justin? Why can't you just *arrange* yourself for once? It makes me crazy! You're always—

I'm telling you, enough.

Oh, your bedside manner.

Her breaths were shallow, the sour smell filling the trunk.

You're going to hyperventilate, Janna. That's the only way you won't get enough air, if you hyperventilate.

I can't help it! Get me out of here, Justin!

What are you doing?

Okay. Okay—I'm on my back, I'm pushing up with my feet. You do it too.

Janna—

Like a leg press. I'm strong. It's an old car.

Ten years isn't old for a Volvo. This came to him from somewhere—a line from some ad? His father, years ago? She was grunting, doing her press. At the fitness center she used a personal trainer and was toying with the idea of becoming one herself. After a few seconds he rolled onto his back and tried it. It was tight, the angle too acute.

Come on, she breathed out, please please please please. Come on, come on.

The only motion, a slight flexing of the metal. Then more of that suspensioned rocking, below. A passerby might think lovers were in the back seat of the car.

I hear something, he said. He wanted to cover her panting mouth with his hand. Listen.

Oh god, it's someone. Help! she said, but with no breath in it.

Hello! he yelled, amazed at how the enclosure, and somehow the darkness too, seemed to stifle the shout. He squirmed out of his leg-press crouch as steps approached. This move involved shoving contortions, Janna crying out weakly, cursing him as his knee met her shoulder, he guessed. He didn't care now. This was the point in the old film where the hero slaps the hysterical woman and she

gets a hold of herself, grateful, admiring, won over.

He got his mouth up against the crack of the trunk, near where it latched.
Hello! Help!

The footsteps stopped.

In here, please! We're in the car!

The trunk, Janna whispered.

We're in the trunk!

Footsteps approached. They sounded heavy, solid. A good thing.

Someone in there?

Yes.

Yes! Janna called with a sob. Her breathing was slower, though still shallow.

What, there's two of you?

Yes.

What are you doing in there? A faint slur yoked the words together. The voice was low and throaty—older. Actually, the voice sounded a bit tickled.

We got locked in. A guy robbed us.

No way! What a fucking drag! I never seen anything like this.

Please, Janna said.

Can you just open the trunk? Justin said. The key might be in the lock there.
Or maybe on the ground somewhere.

Hmm. Not in the lock.

Or just call the police. My fiancée is claustrophobic.

Yeah? The wife, she's got that too, as a matter of—

Have you got a phone?

What's that? Oh yeah, at home. Let me see if I can see a key around here.

The keychain is of, uh . . . it's Elvis, his head.

Not having much luck here. The man started to whistle softly, in tune. *It's now or never.*

I think I'm going to pee, Janna whispered.

Hold on, Justin said. Would you please hurry up, mister?

Hey, I'm doing my best for you, chief!

Maybe you should just go call the cops.

No! Janna said. The key has to be around here!

He might've just stole it, the man said. It's not on the road here.

I don't see why he would have, Justin said stubbornly, hoping the words into truth.

Why didn't he take the car? Nice car. I like these European cars.

He tried, Justin said, reaching to hold Janna's quivering shoulder. He couldn't drive standard.

A momentary silence, then the man burst out in snorty guffaws. Oh, now that's too good! he said finally. Guy couldn't drive standard!

I can't hold it, Janna said. Oh god.

It's all right, Justin whispered.

Oh *god*, get me *out* of here, *please*!

Go call the cops now, please! Justin yelled.

All right, yeah, I will so. I will now. But I was just wondering something first . . .

What?

Got nothing but shit for luck these days. Never the luck, the wife says. If you know what I'm saying. Could you give me a little retainer?

A what?

You know, a retainer. It's legal talk, like on TV. A fee. He paused and then said, firmly: Slip me out some money, whatever you got. I need it. Then I'll call the cops for you. There's a pay phone up the street.

I told you, we were just robbed!

Justin, wait.

We don't have a cent. How the fuck can you ask—

Justin!

Now hang on a minute, chief—I told you, I'm broke, and I'm going to be doing you a favor. I mean, I prefer not to have anything to *do* with cops if it's up to myself. This is going out on a limb for me. It's not like you can't afford it. Look at this car. This fucking *Volvo*.

But we—

It's okay, Janna said, I have something. Some money.

What? Justin said.

Just slip whatever you got through the crack, here by the latch. I can pry, maybe. I got some keys here.

My keys, Justin said. Janna, what are you—

I always keep a twenty separate, she said, in case.

Of course, Justin whispered.

What?

Of course you do, he told her, and now in his mind he saw, not with doting amusement but a stressed rage, Janna opening doors with her hooked pinkie, or with the same fey digit keying in her PIN at the automatic teller. This although, as he'd told her, on any given day a person encountered a dozen infectious agents which, if you were weakened enough, could make you ill or worse. But she was strong—probably all the more so for her years of working with the public at the bistro, where she also did the pinkie thing. Where it must be seen as a stylish or campy affectation, not another symptom of her leery, meticulous nature.

A twenty is good, the man said. Try to slip it through here.

No! Justin said. Put the money away, Janna. He was groping in the dark, flashing the LED, trying to find her hand.

Justin, for God's sake, I'm going to get us out of here. Someone has to.

Let her give me the money, asshole. The voice was closer now, the man kneeling, it seemed. I think you can slip it out here.

How do we know you'll even help us, Justin said, if we give you the money?

It's like you got a choice here? The voice was sneering. Justin inhaled sharply. Then the man added, *Dub!*—and this, for Justin, was the end. This soft little *dub*.

Fuck you! You can take our keys and your phone call and your—shove them up your ass, if you know how to find it. And I'm going to find you tomorrow! The cops are going to—

A horrific slamming beat down on them from above, then it seemed to emanate from all directions, a pummeling they felt inside, slower and steadier than their bolting hearts, as the man hammered the trunk with a fist or the flat of his hand. It could have been a street gang smashing the car with tire irons, bats. Justin rushed his hands to his ears and then to Janna's ears, to protect what was left of her nerves. Stop! he cried. The slamming went on, Janna making a steady high whine of pain or terror. He tried pushing up on the trunk with his fist to absorb the vibrations. He rammmed his palm upward once, a feeble counterblow the man nevertheless must have felt, because now he whacked the metal harder and faster. Justin curled on the floor of the trunk, clamping his palms over Janna's ears, then over his own, back and forth. Though their bodies were jammed together at many points, in this extremity he was fully alone. She must feel the same. He guessed she must feel the same. The beating ended. Heavy footsteps stalked away. The night was quiet again. She was breathing slower—small, sobby catches of breath coming at longer intervals. There was a smell like ammonia and he thought he felt dampness through the right knee of his jeans. He rested a hand on her hip. She seemed to be drifting into a kind of sleep, or a gradual faint, her nervous system, he guessed, no longer able to take the stress.

Now that he didn't have a conscious Janna to coax along, the full weight of his own fear and anger returned. He sobbed for a moment, no tears, eyelids clamped on dryness. Not for the first time he wondered if they actually could suffocate in here. Maybe that was why she'd lost consciousness. His breathing felt tight, but that could just be fear. The trauma of his head blow. A car passed, then another, and he made no effort to cry out.

After a time, soft footsteps approached.

Hello! Please help us! He tried to shout gently, afraid of ripping Janna from her stupor.

Is someone in there? A soft tone, a sort of eunuch voice—the vocal equivalent of the footsteps. Justin explained things, trying to sound calm, murmuring through the crack through which he felt, just once, a cool breath of air. The man listened with a few faint sounds of encouragement. He seemed to be kneeling close to Justin's mouth. The man was an orderly, he said, on his way to the hospital to start his shift on the maternity ward. It was almost 5 A.M. He would flag down the first car he saw, he said, and get somebody to phone the police, or he would find a pay phone, or call from the hospital if all else failed. That would be ten minutes from now. He would run. The odd, adenoidal voice trailed off, and soft steps—rubber-soled, Justin guessed—jogged away into the night.

Justin left his head against the cool of the metal, his mouth as near as possible to the crack from which that one clean breath of air had seemed to seep. As another draft reached him, tears surged into his eyes with a wide-angle shot

of great vaporless skies and fenceless emerald meadows . . . like a tourist still of the prairies, although he could *smell* the fields. There would be air enough, at least. The police would come soon.

Surely, whatever happened, they would live differently now.

A car was nearing slowly. It cruised past—perhaps the police, searching for the Volvo they had been told to look for. But the car didn't double back. Another passed, then another. The sparse traffic of early dawn. It was 5:12. In the eerie light of his watch, her sleeping face was peaceful except for the abiding crease between her eyes. Now she was nestled hard against him in the cold, his arm tight around her, his hand splayed wide on her back to cover as much of her as he could. Were old married couples ever buried in the same coffin? he wondered. He had never heard of it, but surely it happened. Or was there some law against it? Another half-hour passed and the little pre-dawn rush hour seemed to end. Why was he not mystified, or at least puzzled, by this latest lack of help, or by its slowness? He felt just numb. There was never any telling. Now and then other cars came from the west or from the east, but none slowed or stopped. Real help would come eventually, of course—the sidewalks would soon be thronged. Another hour or two. Three at most. What was another hour or two in a lifetime together?



A curious thing he noticed in the years after: in company, he and Janna would often discuss that night, either collaborating to broach the story on some apt conversational cue (which they would both recognize without having to exchange a glance), or readily indulging a request from guests, or hosts, to hear it for the first time, or yet again. And even when passing through a troubled spell in their marriage, they would speak of each other's actions that night only in proud, approving ways. Janna with her granite will, he would say, had faced a claustrophobic's worst nightmare and remained the more rational of them throughout. *She'd probably have got us out of there hours earlier if I'd just listened.* Justin, she would insist, had been competent and forceful the way she had always wanted him to be and had kept her from totally "losing it." Justin would then profess chagrin at how he himself had lost it, screaming at their potential savior, though in fact he was partial to the memory of that recklessly manly tantrum—and on Janna's face, as she watched him replay the scene, a suspended half-smile would appear, a look of fond exasperation. But when the story was done and they left to drive home, or their guests did, a silence would slip between them—not a cold or embarrassed silence, but a pensive, accepting one—and they would say nothing more of that night or its latest rendition. When they were alone together, in fact, they never spoke a word of it.