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Quitting Time

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Quitting Time

Driving the road out of town he glanced impatiently toward the cafe, watching it through shimmering air that blurred the gravel parking lot. He'd already been by here once before and now for a second time the two lane highway took him on past the cafe and the houses and trailers, out to where flat table land opened up. In the distance were the mountains; sometimes when he came out here he wished he could just keep on going, just drive away toward those mountains, but not today. Today was different. Today he had this feeling of something happening, something about to happen. It meant something that he was here at all, that he was out of the house, that it was late afternoon and he had been up and sober for hours. He stopped the car and turned it around and started back again.

She'd be surprised, not expecting to see him until she walked home and found him in front of the tv. She wouldn't expect him to show up at the cafe. But that was why he wanted to do it, he wanted to stop and wait and give her a ride like he was on his way home himself, like he hadn't done in months.

When he pulled upon the screen door she looked up with a smile beginning on her face but then had to look over to the table of customers sitting, eating. He smiled quick to show her he was ok, but she had already been distracted by the others.

A big man sat drinking coffee beneath a faded print of horses galloping. Across from him was a woman with a baby on her lap and two more kids, boys, one sitting on either side of her.

Coming in he nodded in the family's direction and went on up to the counter to sit down. She had this fan going on a low cabinet, pointing right at him but he couldn't feel a thing. For a second he just watched as she rubbed a spoon with a dish cloth, her hands completely bare except for the thin wedding band.

"It's hot out." He rested his forearms on the edge of the formica and when she continued with the dish towel he added, "I thought you might want a lift."

"I'm not closed for 25 minutes," she said and looked up and past him to the occupied table. With a single practiced motion she wiped her hands on her apron and lifted a pot of coffee off the hot plate to take around the corner.

His own wedding ring felt tight. He could only just turn it using his thumb and the side of his little finger. When she came back he told her, "I can wait." He didn't want to not talk. "I went by Frankie's. He said he might have work maybe later this week." It was true that he'd thought about seeing Frankie, but he

didn't know why he'd said this now. He would go by as soon as the weather broke. She was silent. "So how's it been?" he asked.

This got him a quick glance. "Busy."

He nodded and searched for something else to keep the conversation going. Today especially he needed to talk. "Seems pretty quite now."

"Hmm." She left him again, heading back to the table, the family, man, woman and kids.

After they'd paid up and gone and she flipped the sign in the window to say CLOSED he swept the floor for something to do, working carefully, doing it right, just sweeping and sweeping with the sweat coming under his arms and low on his back. She was busy at the counter so when he said, "Nice family," just for something to say she only looked up at him for a second. The floor was clean but he could tell that she wasn't done yet. His mouth felt dry. Through the window he saw the flashing CAFE sign and passing traffic.

When he swept dirt out over the steps he paused. It was finally beginning to cool off. The sign flashed orange, staining the hood and roof of his old car.

Standing in the evening air he imagined that this was their own place, that they were closing up their own place at the end of the day. It didn't seem like that wild a thought right then, not really. He watched the sign flashing orange, black, orange until it finally went out for good. With a last sweep of the top step he turned and went back inside.

She was wiping the counter, her white blouse dark under the arms. Strands of her hair had worked loose on her neck. When she leaned forward he saw her breasts ride up like they were straining in there and though he knew he was staring he couldn't help himself. Tonight it felt like it hadn't in months. He blinked when she looked up.

"Almost done?"

She nodded slowly, saying, "Almost" in a voice barely audible.

"I'll wait outside." He propped the broom against the counter. On his way to the door he pushed a chair in even with three others around a table.

Back outside he was grateful for the evening coolness. He felt light headed. In the quiet between passing cars he could hear the cooling tick of the turned-off sign and he thought how the heat can sometimes do things to you. The sky itself had taken on color now, dirty orange beyond the stretch of field and highway where headlights moved. He turned around when the door shut.

She was working at the lock, her legs pale in stockings and close together below the hem of a black skirt, her waist pulled small above her hips. He looked at her, knowing that he hadn't

really done so for a long time, thinking she looked pretty good. She came down off the steps digging in her purse.

He got in the car, leaned over and opened the door on her side. The engine caught on the second try and he raced it to keep it from stalling while she got in. "Warm evening."

She didn't look over. "It's cooling." She sat up against the door, her legs crossed.

"You bet," he said and nodded.

Gravel crunched as they drove out of the parking lot. She was looking in the mirror of her compact. Behind the car the cafe showed small and dark in the rearview, abandoned.

She peered closer at her reflection.

"I can turn on the overhead. Do you want it?" He leaned forward for the knob.

"No. Leave it off. I can see."

He left it off and sat back. There was traffic. He pulled out in front of a slow moving car and gunned it. A semi came from the opposite direction, catching him off guard and rocking the car as it passed.

"I just thought you might want a ride," he said, trying to explain. "It almost felt like we were closing up our own place." Headlights glared behind them.

She didn't say anything.

He pulled into the gas station on the corner. "We need gas." She looked over at him a second and then handed him some money. He got out and shut the door.

While he pumped gas he looked through the rear window. She faced straight ahead, not moving until a pickup drove in and she turned slightly to watch two men get out. She was still looking in that direction when he went to pay the cashier.

The compact was open again when he got back into the car. The engine started right up. He sat watching the gas gauge rise to almost 1/2 and then put the car in gear and drove out onto the highway. "We're all set now. We could drive for hours." He looked over. "I almost want to just do it, go up to the mountains. Just drive on up there."

"I want to go home and go to sleep. I have to work tomorrow."

He didn't know now about this feeling he had. "There's a new picture in town." She did not say anything so he went on, "It'd be air conditioned."

"I'm tired."

"Sure." He nodded to show that he understood and that it was alright. "Maybe some other time."

"I don't think so. I'm busy. And I think I'm going to be busy, you know."

He rubbed his thigh and felt his knee cap small and hard in his hand.

He turned slowly off the highway, past a limping dog hurrying along the pavement. The headlights caught it and then left it behind. When he looked over she stared straight ahead as if she hadn't seen it at all. He could not find it in the rearview and there was nothing to say.

"I like to walk home." She opened the door while they were still rolling and was out before he could get it into park, before he could even nod. "I don't need any rides, ok? I don't want any rides."

Now he nodded.

She was silent a moment, holding onto the car door with one hand. Then she pulled a five dollar bill out of her pocket. "Here, enjoy your picture." She shut the door and started walking away.

He sat there in the dark not watching her and a car came around the curve, its lights making bright stars in the window.

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