

"Reward"

(excerpt)

by Peter Kovic

Next morning I came to a gas station and tried to shave in the washroom. If I wanted a job in the next town I would need a shave. The guy inside sold me a razor but wouldn't let me in the washroom. I didn't get mad though. He was Middle Eastern or Indian and his accent was thick. He had problems of his own in a place like this. I tried to ask him where I could get a nickel for my empty cans, but I couldn't understand what he said.

I didn't like the look of that town, so by the end of the day I was back on the highway when it started to rain. I looked for a place where the trees were thick enough to keep me dry. When I found one I resolved to wait until the rain stopped.

That's when he showed up.

His car veered off the interstate right in front of me, in a crackle-spray of gravel and snapped tree branches. He jumped out and flattened a hand against his chest, past his overcoat, past his tie. Like if he could get to the skin in time it wouldn't happen. I knew what was going to happen. Finding your skin won't stop what's coming. He went down.

He was gone but I beat his chest and breathed into his mouth and tried to bring him back anyway. They teach you that in the army. I sat in the rain with the door open and the engine running and the radio still playing bad '80s music.

I should have driven him to the town I didn't like the look of and called 911. There would have been questions, forms, and fingerprints. Maybe nights in a cell. That's nothing next to a man's life.

And I would have done the right thing, if I were dry. Instead I looked at him, and you can tell with some people - you can tell they're alone and no one will miss them. He was a little older than me, maybe fifty. He wore an Old suit, because he had no one to tell him when it was time to get a new one. He was Heavy, because he had no one to tell him what to eat. No one to tell him there are better haircuts for thinning hair. He looked like a company man, who did his job and drove his anonymous car home to nothing and had no friends. Life had skipped us both. That's how he looked in the rain.

I put him in the trunk. I drove back onto the interstate and kept on the way I'd been going.

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I got a motel room two towns later.

I brought in the briefcase from the passenger seat and the suitcase from the backseat. I did the locks and shut the blinds and turned off the window unit because I was still wet. It felt good to shave, shower, brush my teeth, and put on dry clothes. I washed my wet clothes using handsoap and hung them in the shower.

Then I decided I couldn't ignore his stuff anymore and spread it all on the bed.

The handgun was sleek and made of a lightweight polymer. Three magazines of .40 caliber ammunition. A thousand dollars in small bills - that's how I paid for the room - and a half-dozen driver's licenses from different states. The names on the licenses were different, but the pictures were all the same. I never had a cellphone before so it took me a while to figure out the charger.

A lot of people would have seen everything and changed their minds about him. Me? I was still sitting beside him in the rain. To me, he was still someone lonely, who had made mistakes or bad choices ten or twenty years ago. He was still just a company man. For a strange company.

I tried to sleep. In the middle of the night I was sweating. I turned on the window unit. After that I slept.

In the morning I was dry and fed and had slept in a bed instead of a patched-up sleeping bag. I have no excuse for answering his cell phone, except that sin breeds more sinning. The interstate was going by when I picked the phone up, ringing, from the passenger seat, next to the paper wrappings that had come with breakfast.

"Mr. Abraham gave me this number." It was a woman's voice. She sounded on the verge of middle age. "Is this Clark?"

"Yes," I said.

"Do you know who this is?"

I hesitated before answering. "Yes."

"Okay, there's a garbage can at Fifth and Waugh. At 10:30 a.m. you'll find a package in it, with a photograph and some information. Plus half the money. That's what Mr. Abraham said. Half now, half when it's done. I want it to be Done by five this afternoon. Okay?"

"Yes."

"That's what he said. He also said you'd destroy the photo and the other papers."

"Yes."

"Okay. I'm hanging up now."

I hung up too.