

The Passenger

She is climbing 95 kph along the Brand Highway, then drops to the limit as she enters the outskirts of town and there he is. A man by the fence line, waiting. It looks like his wait has been long. The sun has etched a hard day into him. It has tried him, so that each passing car, each opportunity, glows feverishly in his eyes.

Though she is not in the practice of picking up hikers, the man, at twenty metres, appears strikingly similar to her late fiancé, Marko. The same fine cheek bones and Balkan skin, the same razored dark hair and flannel shirt, hanging casually loose, met by suede midway. His neck cranes forward into a familiar stoop as he pitches himself off the fence and begins to amble forward, fingers rubbing the pale of his palms, his eyes lowered.

Inside the vaporous heat of the car, a chill shudders through her. He is sitting beside her now, as if they had parted only yesterday. She turns to see eyes that are vibrant. Ever brown. Looking toward a teenage girl he has always known.

‘Hi, how far north you heading?’ he asks. She tells him home is on the forty-mile stretch via Enneabba.

‘I’m going further but that’s fine’ he continues, with a little small talk.

One strong arm holds tight a bundled up carry bag. Its contents stretching the material so that the zipper has almost given way in parts; something has once been shoved and pushed inside. In his right hand, he holds a silver cigarette lighter. He thumbs over the smooth, wide surface, catching the sun between motions.

‘Mind if I smoke?’ he asks.

Puffs of serpentine trails are already escaping from his mouth. There is no point arguing.

As they swerve back onto the main road, she keeps the corner of her eye focused left. Twenty minutes pass and her curiosity is stretching further than the miles they are riding, through the silence to her eager tongue, but she holds it. He is the passenger; it is his words expected.

Then, he releases his grip from the bag and turns to look at her. For a long moment his brown eyes examine her face; his chin flanks his right shoulder. He studies her hair; the colour of wheat, and her floral dress perched neatly on her mid-thigh. Then he tilts his head, ever so slightly, and she feels his eyes stray toward her neckline, then away again.

‘You know...you look like a girl I once knew.’

Then it all comes at once. The car surges forward, then anchors back, and she tries to see through her tears, but her gut is turning over – like all those times before – and she murmurs something about Marko and ‘wanting it to end’.

‘No more’ her trembling voice is heard and the passenger has now fixed his eyes.

‘What?’ he asks, grimly.

‘We were in high school together.’

‘Who is we?’

‘She was my best friend. She did the unspeakable.’

'Who?'

'Her name was Julie.'

'Was Julie?' he probes.

'Yeah, that's right, 'was.' It was too hard with her around. She couldn't have been that good a fuck.'

'What you saying, you knocked off your friend?'

'I came home one day and dropped her where she stood.'

'Stop the car!'

He stiffens. His throat tightens and he needs air. His plans have changed.

She scrambles for the glove box; something in it she wants. Hands cutting air. Fist knots pulling at cotton seams. The gear stick now disengaged, the engine roaring as the car sways left and right, cutting the edges of roadside shrubs and swallowing dirt.

Then it all comes to a stop. Looking down the barrel of a Smith and Wesson, his eyes are not the eyes she once knew.

A void fills the seat where Marko once sat, and the stranger is now a figure in her rear vision mirror, fading quickly from sight. She will be home in five minutes.

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