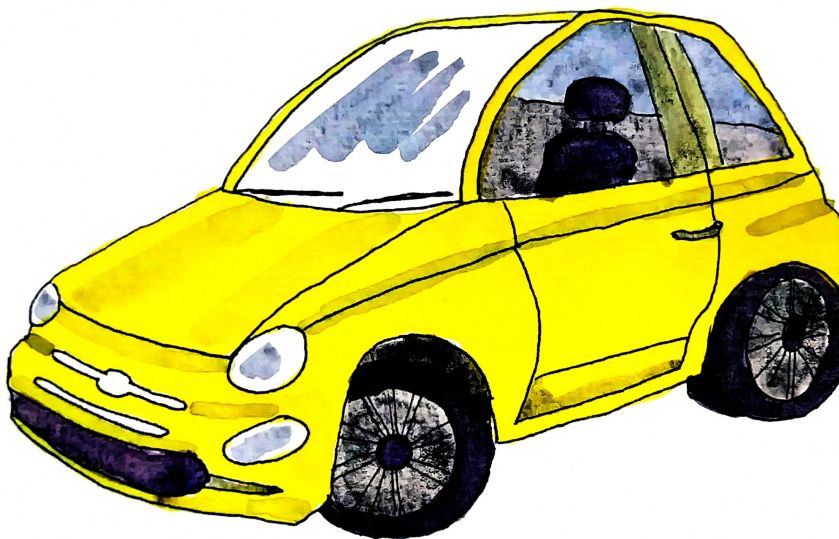


Rule

Free to do whatever with, just leave it uncredited.

The tiny two-door rental bumped along the increasingly rough road. It was still pavement but it looked like it hadn't been maintained in a while and they'd just passed a sign that read seasonal road. She tried the word again as she drove and the old man spoke up.



“No, it’s sort of got an ar sound underneath there. Not ar like Robert but ar like Goethe, like behind the vowels not the consonants.”

“More brain, or Braun?”

“No that’s too up front with it, think ar don’t say it.
Keep trying.”

“Awe shit!”

“Don’t worry you’ll get it.”

“No, there’s something, a tree down on the road up there,
big one.”

“What’s that fancy GPS say?”

“It says go straight ahead fourteen miles till the next
turn. Should of let me take the thruway.”

“You know we can’t. If we get it moving too fast-”

“Yeah, I know, I know. Hold up, someone’s coming up the
road behind the car.”

“I don’t hear another car. Where’s my stick? Might as
well stretch my legs, ask ‘em if there’s a way around, they
wouldn’t come up this way if there wasn’t.”

Sticks on the dashboard, right in front of you. They
look like hunters or something, on foot, got long guns of
some kind.” But the blind man was already out of the car by
the time she said it.

“Afternoon. Happen to know the way to Yellow Mills
from hear? We’re a bit lost.”

“Lost that car.”

“Sure enough. Is there a way around you know?”

“Walk back up th’ way ya’ll came. Left where the pavement starts. Leave now ya’ll get there a’fore dark.”

“Car made it this far, I’m sure we can get back around the other way.”

“Car stays.”

“He’s pointing the gun at us.”

“Our land here, our car now. You is interlopers.”

“God damnit.” Said the blind man. “You shit for brains rednecks seen Deliverance on re-run and just think that-” His words were cut off by the report of a shotgun fired into the air.

“Trespassing. Now you just start walking.”

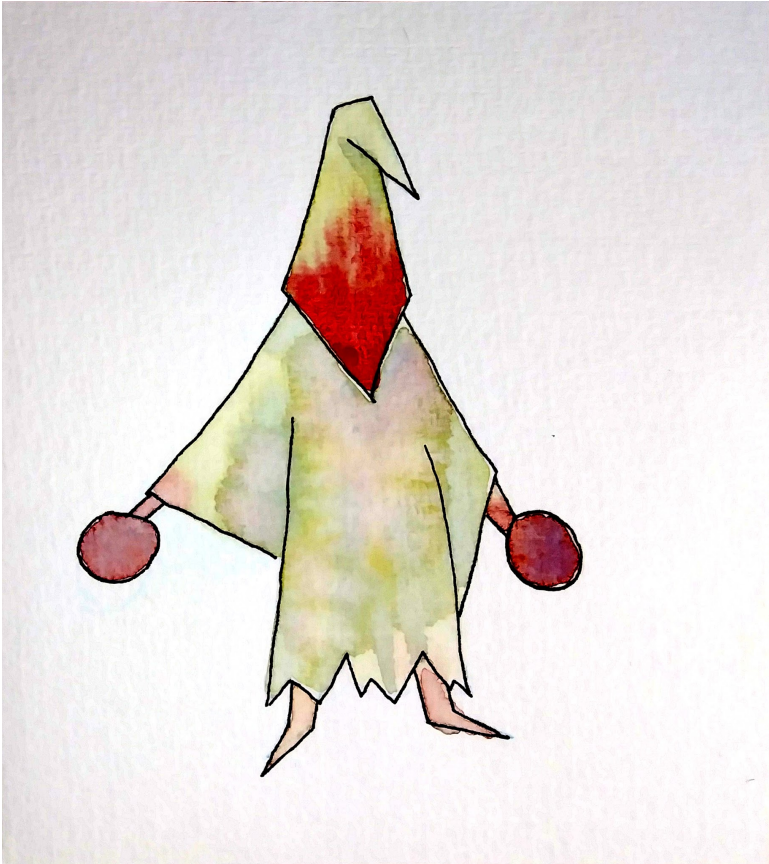
“Alright. You listening?” The blind man asked.

“Yeah boss.”

“Put the ar sound in there when you say it. Like this.”

Then the blind man made a noise, sounded like a belch or some kind of curse word in a guttural language. One syllable but whole alphabets crammed into it. A hard word to describe, even now hearing it again she wondered if she’d ever be able to get it right. She didn’t have time to think about it too much before she saw it though. Same as last time, shorter than she remembers, all triangles and stains, fitted sheets thrown over some sort of glass

skeleton. It stood in front of the blind man and held up those weird metal balls it had for hands. It made it's noise; something like a sneeze or a sharp intake of breath with a



click like cradling wood.

“No.” Said the blind man. “Just take those two with the guns. They’re yours.”

It closed the distance to the would be carjackers fast enough that it's peaked hood fell back. It's head was a

sick yellow color like stained teeth, small and oddly proportioned traced all over with pink almost the way her own hands turned in the cold. Something about that it made it look less believably alive. The driver thought maybe it was the way it moved.

It bent itself around like it didn't have joints. Like motion wasn't a kind of coordinated falling. That alone didn't make her want to look away, what it did with its mouth did, if mouth was the right word. It was an opening but it was too big to be a mouth, and it had too many teeth, even if they were all on the bottom. It sort of scraped it's mouth on the one guy and just left this raw empty roadkill looking thing behind. The driver got a good look when the other guy shot at it.

He must have missed but it did leave off on the first guy, he was dead anyway. It raised it's big metal mitts up like it was going to going to hit the guy but then it seemed to notice something and went after him with it's mouth instead. The second barrel got it center mass but it just went right on with it's paint scraper routine. It got every bit of flesh that was facing up, on both of the guys, then it stopped and got back into the car, into the back seat. The blind man followed, taping back with his stick till he made contact with the car then following on till he found the door

and seated himself in the passenger's seat. He shouted before closing the door, "you comin'?"

The driver walked back to the car but didn't get in. "What about them?"

"They're dead."

"Yeah but someone's gonna find them and then-".

"And by then we'll be gone."

"Yeah but the police."

"Are not going to see that and think 'bet a couple of guys killed 'em.' Let's go."

"Where?"

"Where he said, back the way we came and then right when it turns back into a proper road."

The driver spun the wheel, then the wheels, and drove back the way they came. The bodies in the road were low enough now, after what it did, that she could pass over them with room to spare. This was bad. It was getting to be too easy for he blind man. All she could think was it was too often that the blind man was choosing death.

It was maybe a mile before it made its noise and she almost put the car into a ditch. The blind man had spun around before the car was even fully stopped. It made its noise again, louder. That horrible noise, startling, grating, like a sharp intake of breath and the sound of water starting

to boil. The drivers heart started beating fast every time she heard it, like waking up from a dead sleep to the sound of a dog you don't own barking in your room.

"Shit!" said the blind man. "been shot. Shit. Shit. Shit!" He was stretched halfway into the back seat, moving his hand around in some kind of pantomime.

"You said it couldn't get hurt, not by-" The driver didn't turn around, she knew she wouldn't be able to see anything, not if the blind man didn't say the word.

"It's alive, 'course it can get hurt. Oh shit. You need to find me a grocery store, Wal-Mart would be good, or one of them Targets but with the fresh food section. Shit. God-damn rednecks." He turned back around and settled into the seat just as it made its noise again. "Drive damnit."

She drove. "I remember, you said bullets can't hurt it. That's what you said, don't tell me you didn't, I got a great memory remember, that's the whole reason-"

"Yeah, I know. Bullets are made of lead, or copper and lead. That's fine, they won't even touch it. Those assholes must have loaded rock salt. Shit. Let's go, find the damn store and ask me something, keep me talking I gotta keep it distracted." The blind man looked nervous.

There's something distressing about seeing a man who holds a monster in thrall get worried. This was a man, a

blind man who navigated life without the aid of a sense that contributed enormously to the evolutionary success of mankind, that walked around with absolute security. A man who feared nothing. This old, bland, uncomplicated man was SkyNet to some sort of invisible terminator. They had walked down some of the darkest city streets with millions of dollars in plastic shopping bags with absolute confidence and safety. Now he was worried over some crap about salt and the availability of a supercenter nearby. “Umm why does salt-” She ground her teeth as the thing made its noise cutting her off.

“Ask me something, shit, something else, I need to keep it distracted, pretend it's scared of the dentist and we're in the waiting room, don't talk about teeth, alright?”

“What, ah, what is it? What do you think it is?”

“Good yeah, I don't know. The guy before me said it was an angel. He talked about it like it was God's own army here on the Earth for to do the work of the lord. He was an odd one though, a right sack of assholes honestly. Like he said that's why he was blind, 'cause of the angel thing. Like when that guy saw the burning bush and got stuck blind or something.”

“Moses wasn't blind.”

“What? Who? Shit I don’t know, he was the holy roller.”

“But he was blind too huh, what’re the odds? Angel though, weird, what’d you think?”

“I don’t think it’s an angel, see angels got wings. That’s sort of how it works no wings, no angel, end of story. Maybe it’s older than that though anyway.”

“Older?”

“Yeah see Angels are a Christian thing, and there weren’t any of those and therefore there weren’t any Angels way back when. Que ee pee.”

“Q. E. D.”

“That’s what I said.” The bland man stuffed the cigarette he’d rolled between his front teeth and lit it. “No Christians no angels. And what’d they have before Christians? Everything else. Like those hippies who invented the Christmas tree.”

“Pagans?”

“Yeah, like they had a whole stable of things, Jesus just had him the Angels and Devils. Those polygons had them like fairies and gnomes and dwarves and zombies and fairies and shit, whole herds of ‘em more than I got the names of, and they knew all kinds of secrets about how to keep from getting on their bad side.”

“So you think it’s a vampire?”

“What now?”

“A Dracula?”

“No, but like something else. Something that didn’t get a movie. It’s like take the irons, they-”

“Irons?”

“Yeah, that stuff on its hands. Like it’s iron. It’s not steel, iron is older than steel, iron’s an old, old metal and you go back and start reading about some of the old stories and shit about the fairies, and iron’s like, a big deal.”

“I thought those were hands”

“Nah, that’s ignorant. I really gotta start educating you on this, but all you want to do is practice the damn word.”

“Sorry.”

“No, it’s fine, you need to practice it sometime. But yeah, it’s got hands, big ones, and they’re all claws but not like a cat’s claws, or a bear or anything, they’re like a mole. Thick and hard and wide like for digging but not for digging in the dirt. It’s for digging in folks like you and me, or dinosaurs or some shit.”

“Then what’s the deal with the... irons?”

“So say you got a dog, like a wild mean dog, but you want to make it your dog and take your dog for a walk.

Dogs gotta walk, do it's thing. You can build a fence and keep everyone away from the dog or you can get a leash. But what if your dog's mean, like eat a bunch of kids who just want to pet it, mean. Well, you still gotta walk that dog so you get a muzzle. Dog gets to walk, kids get to not be food. Dog's still dangerous but it's under control, that iron, that's control."

"Alright but what is it?"

"This again? Alright you know the show where the guy saw him a giant bunny rabbit?"

"Who framed Roger Rabbit?"

"Sure I don't know. This guy could see the rabbit, and nobody else could, that rabbit was a Pooka. Pooka's like a little guy, like a leprechaun or some shit, but they're bad news. They live in rocks see, and they're invisible."

"So not Who framed Roger Rabbit."

"You tell me. Pookas are the closest I ever got. Invisible, check. Lives in the ground, check. Can't open a door, check."

"Can't open a door?"

"Yeah, it can't open a door, can't go through a closed one either. Walls? Sure, wall is no problem. Windows neither. Just no doors. See, doors are different from walls. We put up a door and we go in and out there. We let our

friends in and keep everyone else out, we close doors or open them. Walls we just build, nothing special about a wall. Make it for the same reasons but we don't open a wall and close a wall, walls just a wall. There's all kind of walls out there, naturally occurring walls even. Ain't naturally occurring doors. It's the way-

“Trapdoor spiders.”

The blind man sucked hard on the cigarette and a centimeter of ash fell down the front of his shirt. “Anyone ever tell you you don't know when to keep quiet? Now I know you think that's clever, spider digs a hole, spider makes a door. Keeps the baddies out and lets the food fall in. But that's not a door. We call it a door 'cause we think it acts like one, we want it to be a door. That ain't a door 'cept to the spiders, and so it don't count for a door but to spiders and whatever spiders got that lines up with what I got.”

“You think spiders do?”

“Why not, it's as good a reason as any to explain why they got any business building doors. See nobody goes out and does anything for no reason, spiders aren't different. Spider makes a door, stands to reason they made the door to keep stuff out. It's foolish to think spiders aren't making doors for the same reasons we are. But they're spiders not

folks, spider-folks maybe? Nah, spiders got their own boogie men if they got them at all, and they follow spider rules, just like boogie men follow mans rules.”

“Like the don’t write it down rule?”

“Just like. Rules are what make everything real.

Games kids play are all whatever, until someone makes the rules, remembers them forever, like baseball or weddings.

Take getting married, that’s a thing people do, it’s a real thing because we have rules that go with it. By itself it’s just a word, marriage, the rules make it real, make it count. So when I told you rule A number one is none of this can ever go down on paper, can’t ever get recorded, that is part of what makes everything work.”

“About that, if I wrote down, that it can’t go through a shut door would...”

“Don’t.”

“|...”

“No. Do not write it down. Do not consider writing it down. Do not think about what could happen if you write it down. Do not make a picture. Do not film a video. Do not record a tape or an ipod or any of that. Do not try to come up with a way around it or any garbage like that.

“We have a special relationship me and it, you and me, built on trust. I trust that it will do what I ask. I ask it to

do things that I know it can do. I trust that you will do what I ask. I ask you to do things that I know you can do. I know that if I ask you to remember that all that bullshit that it suffered today” it made the noise “will be better after about six hours if we find us a super store, you will.”

“Is that all it’ll take?”

“Yup.” The blind man was quiet for what felt like just a few seconds, it must have been too long. The thing made it’s noise. It was louder than any it had made today. Urgent. The sound of teeth snapping shut, the sound of bone breaking. “Damn it didn’t I say to keep me talking? Don’t you remember that?”

“We’re pulling into a store now. Hold on.”

“Here? Good. Go on park right up front, anywhere at all, no one gonna hassle a blind man. Now here” and he handed the driver a roll of bills “what you get, one, a shopping cart, one with the little fold down seat you can put a kid in. Two, get iodine, fill that seat with iodine. Three, and meat, fill that cart with meat. No poultry, fish if they don’t have enough real meat but fish stinks so meat’s first. Get it all, all they got. Frozen is fine but whatever, cuts before ground and fresh before frozen. Don’t wait around for them to get anything out of the back and ask them to do a register just for you if there’s a line, you’re spending good

money. Don't be long, I know Ol' MacDonald and Happy Birthday but that's gonna get old quick."



Then the blind man started singing. His singing voice was flat and bad. Hoarse, like someone who smoked too much when they were a kid, and awful like someone who only ever sang when they knew for sure no one could hear.

The driver got out and bought the meat. She put everything into the trunk with the money. She got back in

the car and started driving around looking for a motel. Every now and then she asked a question or made some sort of comment to keep the blind man talking. It didn't make any noise. She found a place and checked them into a dingy little motel on a former artery road. The long, low building had a new metal roof, and peeling white paint on the siding.

On the word of the blind man she put all the meat in the bathtub-removing the packaging first-and filled it with water. Then she dumped in all the iodine, all that is except for the last little bit in one bottle. She brought that bottle back to the car, and handed it to the blind man. Then she went back to the room and held the door open. The blind man got out of the car, leaving his door open, took a mouth full from the bottle of iodine and spit it into the back of the car the way a fire breather might spit methanol. The driver felt something breeze past her.

The blind man mined oysters in his throat with a deep hacking noise and spit repeatedly in the parking lot. Finally, he called out, "I smell Chinese, let's eat." They got back into the car and were seated ten minutes later.

"So what was all that?"

"Let's have some quiet, just a bit now."

Even though this was easily the strangest day since she started as the blind man's apprentice she understood

the request. However easy the blind man was, he wasn't a natural talker. He was a different generation, one that understood quiet, one that was comfortable there. They sat eating their food and as one's mind is apt to when presented with silence the drivers began to reflect. She thought about recent events.

They were supposed to be on their way to a job, it would be the second with the both of them. She didn't know what sort of job it was, some government job was all she knew. But then the blind man didn't like to teach by talking when showing was available as an option. If she was honest about it that probably was a good philosophy, a good teaching method, for an apprenticeship; although it wasn't as if she were learning to be a plumber. Plumbers could at least see the pipes, the tools of the trade, books, pamphlets, youtube videos, and what not at times when they weren't actively snaking a drain or whatever.

She was stuck with the prospect of learning everything there was to know about a thing that she couldn't even see unless the blind man said the word, and even then only until it had done whatever it was the blind man told it to. A minute or two a go and then poof-gone again. Hell, until today she didn't even know that she could hear the thing when she couldn't see it, that she could feel it

move past when it was invisible.

Thinking that word she stopped short of a second, almost choked on a piece of carrot-one of the big some places make by cutting one into slices on the vertical rather than horizontal like literally any other restaurant would. She remembered what the blind man had said, it wasn't invisible. Well, the blind man said it was and it wasn't. Was in the sense that she wouldn't be able to see it, wasn't in the sense that she wouldn't see it because it wasn't there. She remembered the way it was explained and once again regretted that at the time she hadn't been able to turn the conversation around to how the blind man had lost his sight.

The blind man has said that to a blind person a table was invisible, couldn't see it. Any blind person could get an idea of what the table looked like though, reach out and touch it, use it as a table. The thing was like that. In that, even with sight she was blind to it, couldn't see it. Still, she couldn't reach out and touch it-not even if the blind man told her where to reach, couldn't use it as what it was, couldn't do a thing with it or even with the knowledge that it was there. That had to be part of the reason she could practice the word. It wasn't there, not for her, not for anyone but the blind man unless they were there when the blind man said the word. She'd make a list, a mental list of

questions to ask after quiet time was over.

One; was that why she could practice the word? Two; what the hell was up with the iodine and meat? Three; did they really need to do that with those guys back there? Yeah, she had to ask, especially that last one. There were so many options back there. It would have been so easy to pay those two off, the roll in the blind man's pocket would have probably been enough. It wouldn't have hurt either there was more than enough in the trunk. Hell if they were on their way to a job they could have left those two the money from the trunk, if this new job paid half as well as the last they wouldn't be hurting for a long time anyway. They could have just kept quiet about the money and left the car walked back and got a new car. Left the car, walked back and got the police. Anything at all really. No reason not to involve the police either, they weren't breaking any laws, they weren't on any lists. If she was honest she knew why the blind man did it though, it was easier. It was faster. It was simpler, cost nothing, nothing that counted to the blind man, and it showed off. Damn that guy liked to show off.

In a way that was how they met, by virtue of the blind man's willingness to show off. One would expect a person in his line to keep a low profile, in a way he did-no banks, no fixed address, no plastic; only cash, no names. Then he

turns around and puts an ad in the paper. She'd seen it in a newspaper left on a table in her local independent coffee shop. It wasn't a want ad either, full page right in the national section, negative space print on a solid page. It was hard to miss. It said: Good memory? Prove it. 1 million after tax salary. Drivers license required. Then there was a toll free number. She called it and an automated voice asked "Do you have a driver's license? Press 13ad4f9ib749b#o0oo0o0vbebvveb12 to confirm." She smiled a little remembering how she'd got it on the first try only to find out later that any number that called in and failed on the first try never got through again. She'd heard that from some friends who had tried calling on a public phone. She didn't have terribly many friends but she had asked those she did have because after she keyed in the code it had just said "Thank you" and rung off.

The next day a blind man had walked into the coffee shop-five minutes after opening according to the preternaturally cheerful barista-sat at a table in the corner and sat there for hours not doing a damned thing and just generally making people uncomfortable. The barista had said he didn't order anything, didn't do anything, just slipped her a hundred from a thick roll and told her he was waiting for someone, asked to be shown to a chair and

wondered if she'd bring his friend over when they arrived. While she rung up the drivers latte she confessed she had asked the blind man what his friend looked like and immediately felt like a jackass.

The driver had smiled and said no one would hold that against her. Then she asked if there had been any more crazy stuff in the paper, like yesterday. When she chuckled and rattled off the number the cashier asked her if that was really it. Then the blind man had called out for her to bring his friend over. That had been how they met, in a coffee shop.

The blind man had asked some little questions, did she call the number more than once, had she written anything down, was she some sort of Rain Man or did she just have a good memory? No, no, no just good. From there they'd walked across town to a little park while the blind man did this weird sort of stream of consciousness poem about everything he could tell about just exactly what he thought was around.

Can't smell the coffee grounds now there's a bar near here, somebody's piss, storm drain, that's a mulberry, this sidewalks new, this roads been resurfaced, it rained last night, worms on the path here, never any ducks in this park, lotta pigeons though, no dogs off leash sign... a million little

things some of them perfectly accurate, others not, some of them could be but there wasn't anything to confirm that she could tell. In the park he'd ask to hear back everything he'd said. It had been good enough and they'd become a team the next day, after the blind man gave her a junky messenger bag full of cash.

"Alright let's get back, sleep a few hours 'fore we head on, tonight. They got a toilet here?" The blind man was already standing up and reaching in his pocket to hand the driver some money.

"Wall behind you and on your left, straight back. The sign says unisex. Do you want-"

"Nah, I got the stick." With that he shuffled off, tapping.

The driver walked to the counter to pay but found herself wondering again what it must be like to walk around in the dark all the time. Standing there as the lady rang her up she wondered if it was even dark, seemed like she'd read that blindness wasn't the same for every body. A moment later she heard a whoosh, they must have one of those hot air hand dryers, and the blind man was working his way back to the table.

"Over here." She called out and the blind man course corrected.

Outside in the weird little parking lot of the tiny strip mall they were approached by a short fat woman with a hairdo that looked like it might have been stolen from a department store manikin. She burst from out of a desperately glamorous hair salon and waddled up to them with the speed of someone with bad knees. The blind man was approached, and the driver was addressed. It was a peculiar thing and it seemed to happen quite regularly, seeing the two of them together, noticing the black glasses or the folded up white cane, people had a tendency to ignore the blind man. It was exactly the opposite of what it could be like walking a dog, but it was always a bad experience.

A certain type of person will come up on any dog they see out in public. These people mean well, love dogs, but interact strangely. They will immediately get down on the dogs level and start interacting; maybe let the dog sniff a hand or lick a face but always pet the dog. It's strange, they interact with the dog who doesn't know them and certainly doesn't understand them, but usually ask questions that there is no chance the dog could answer while seemingly ignoring the person with the leash: "What's your name?" or "Are you going for a walk? Lucky you!" But

that's just awkward, the experience with the blind man is wretched.

It's not the way he responds that makes it awful, it's the fact that almost invariably the people don't seem to realize how rude they're being. Some of them get it after a moment and can't apologize enough, but more often than not they respond with anger. The first question put to a guy with no legs or a hook hand is never "How'd you lose it?" Nobody but a child would ask that right out of someone they didn't know, someone they passed on the street. Everyone seemed to think it was alright with the blind man. It was just fine to talk like he couldn't hear or answer for himself. At least this time it wasn't the first thing the stranger said.

"I saw him go in to the Chinese." She clawed at one of the blind man's hands.

The driver's heart beat a little faster. This wasn't good, the blind man was already in a bad mood, tired or something, and he never seemed to take it well when people did this.

"Was he born blind? No, wait, never you mind. All things are possible through our lord Jesus Christ. Kneel down and be healed!"

The driver could only sputter, she felt so helpless, she felt terrible. She felt anger on behalf of the blind man, that this should be in his life, something he had to put up with. She felt worry for the woman, the worry one feels watching a tourist approach a grizzly. Above it all though she felt embarrassed, she felt awkward, there was no circumstance where the interaction she was witnessing was appropriate. This, was never alright.



To her surprise the blind man just stood there, didn't say a word, didn't pull back from this coarse woman forcing

her faith into the face of strangers. When the woman pulled on his sleeves the blind man kneeled, right there in the parking lot. The driver watched as she pulled the black glasses from the blind man's head and still holding them raised the blind man's right hand in her left high above his head.

The flesh that had been covered by the blind man's glasses was pale and soft. it shined with a thin layer of sweat or oil. The driver couldn't help but think about actors who wear glasses for a role and destroy the illusion when they take them off and reveal that normal looking skin beneath, proving they don't normally wear glasses. The woman had started swaying just a little and wormed the fingers of her right hand through the fingers of the the blind mans left, her palm pressed to the back of his hand. She moved their hands to the blind man's forehead and pushed back till he was facing the sky.

She moved his head in a slow tight orbit and intoned "Oh Jesus, oh Jesus." repeatedly in time to her movements. Her words and voice made the whole thing sound vaguely sexualized and just added one more layer of grotesque inappropriateness to the event.

After seconds that passed with the glacial pace of centuries she pushed away from the blind man and exclaimed "Be he-eel-de!"

She ended up on her behind facing the both of them and the blind man laying prone, his head back towards the restaurant. As they both slowly got to their feet the driver felt the briefest moment of joy, of hope. The blind man was facing the restaurant but he moved his head around strangely looking upwards, facing the clouds and sky. All the while he mumbled something that could have could have been "Jesus" but might just as easily been and far less appropriate two-syllable word.

The woman regained her feet second and rushed over to the blind man. She reached up for his face and was crying loudly. The blind man kept looking up, turning away from the woman. The few spectators who had been in the windows of the nearby buildings began to move as if they would approach, steps were taken towards doors, one or two were pushed open, but no one left a building. When she finally managed to get her hand on either one of his cheeks the blind man stopped and looked straight ahead.

The woman screamed when faced with the two empty orbits of his eyes. She let go of his face and fell

heavily to the ground, heaving with sobs on the macadam of the parking lot.

The blind man smoothed his shirt. In a loud voice that clearly belied the belief that there must be something of an audience assembled the blind man said "There's nothing good about what you done and there's nothing good about you."

Walking over to him the driver stood there a moment before touching the blind man's shoulder. The blind man turned and held out his hand so that it just brushed the drivers side with the back of two fingers and they walked away, back to the motel. Behind them they heard the woman's sobs quiet and the jangle of bells as doors closed and people went back to their business.

It was quiet on the walk back to their room. The traffic was light. The cars that did drive by seemed to have exceptionally good mufflers. Birds and insects and wind through the leaves of trees seemed subdued or at least busy somewhere else. A couple towns away and several hundred feet straight up personal protective equipment in the form of headset earmuffs created a subdued environment that could have been called peaceful except for the mechanical vibration of a massive engine and the heavy cadence of helicopter rotors.

“A-10-1 air to base. Got a tree down across the fire road, before black creek.”

“Base A-10-1 copy. Tree down in the E-2 grid square.”

“Something in the road too. Maybe get someone other than the volunteers out there to check it out.”

“Copy A-10-1.”

The pilot moved his helicopter off, and the other man in the aircraft circled the area on the map in black grease pencil before looking back down to his infrared camera display. Downed trees and illegal deer feeders he thought. Everyone grew there pot indoors these days anyway. He really wished they'd find something.

Back in the hotel room the blind man checked the thing in the bathtub and sent the driver out for some more iodine. When the driver left the blind man was laying barefoot on top of the covers on one of the twin beds. The curtains were drawn but the lights were on. When he turned to pull the door closed he wondered if maybe the blind man was already asleep, he always seemed to have trouble sleeping, but the blind man called out.

"You might get me some new glasses too."

"Sure." And the door latched shut. Out of habit the driver checked that it was locked. It was. No one would wander in and end up, well, ate.

After the first time, the blind man had explained it that way. A hamburger isn't dead, it's food. He'd said that however much you might know that a hamburger was formerly a solid hunk of meat, and before that a live cow, lately dead, no one called a hamburger dead. The driver could name a few people from her pre-apprenticeship life that might object, a couple of people with those meat is murder bumper stickers, but she accepted the logic of it.

He said it wasn't such a bad thing that just happened, it just seemed that way. It seemed that way because they had something the party-no-longer-privy didn't, knowledge. They knew he, the job, the hit, was dead. He didn't. When you're dead, you don't know you're dead. A cow don't know it's a hamburger, doesn't know it used to be a cow, doesn't know anything. We know it, so it seems wrong to us, feels wrong, but it's not.

This was how in an office with a very bloody floor the blind man explained that murder was just fine, by way of supporting argument the blind man offered half a million right there if she wanted to walk away and make like none of this ever happened. She thought about all this as she

parked the car in the far too large parking lot of a very new chain drug store. She tried to remember the way the room had smelled all empty and rusty as she nodded to the bored cashier's greeting and wandered over to the first aid section. She juggled a few bottles of iodine as he spun a little display of sunglasses at the end of another aisle. She tried to remember that first guy's name, Loro-, Lozo-, Leo-, something with a L and too many vowels. She grabbed a pair of those huge black glasses, old people glasses, and headed towards the cashier.

Bright fluorescents buzzed overhead as she stood there waiting for her items to be rung up. No, she didn't have a rewards card. No, she didn't want one. She tried to remember what the man's face had looked like, before, not after. What was the cashier thinking about she wondered. What someone needed 5 quarts of iodine for? What the name of the singer was in original version of the knock off instrumental version of Hey Jude that washed dimly out of the P.A.? She probably wasn't wondering what it looked like when something horrible scraped the flesh from a man the way one of those tropical cat-fish scrapped algae from an aquarium wall. They smiled at each other and she walked out wondering how many other people were walking around

thinking about the horrible things in their life they'd gotten used to.

Back in the hotel the lights were still on. When the door shut again the blind man said "Just dump it in there. Try and make sure you can't see nothing through the water. And run in some more if it looks to be leaking out, old tubs, some of them don't seal real nice."

"I got those glasses."

"Right."

The driver put them on the wobbly round table by the drawn shades and carried the other bag into the bathroom. The tub was still nearly full to the overflow but the water was looking dull. No longer a deep opaque brown it looked more like watery coffee. She poured in iodine until the dark color was restored and went and laid down on the other bed.

The blind man didn't move, just laid there, like he might have been asleep. The driver knew her erstwhile master wasn't asleep though, something about the blindness made it hard for him to get to sleep. There had been a commercial on the television once, something about sleeping medicine special for people without sight. For a brief few hours the blind man had been really excited about it. He'd set the driver to calling this doctor and that, a couple pharmacies, even sent her out to buy a laptop with a

built in camera so he could arrange an appointment over the net. Get a prescription sent in and picked up that day.

By the time the driver had come back with the laptop though the blind man's mood had turned. He'd apparently managed to get a pharmacist to read him the actual name of the drug over the phone. Not the brand name, not the trade name, the generic name or any of that. He'd got a line on the actual chemical name. It turned out to be some synthetic benzodiazepine, nothing special. Something already tried under a new coat of advertising.

There'd been a strangely metaphysical conversation after that. The quality of sleep as opposed to the condition of unconsciousness. How sleep was restorative while a period of nothing, just a mind turned off, was of as much value in fixing a problem as fixing a car's persistently leaking tire by continually filling the tire day after day was. It temporarily rendered the impaired state of things serviceable, but hardly fixed the leak. He'd gone on about how people never thought about blindness and sleep.

Now ,they lay on their beds, in the same dingy motel room, five feet from each other, in completely different worlds. The driver thought about how she was entirely aware of how drab and tan the room was. How the pattern of stains on the carpet was probably as good as a

fingerprint to the cleaning staff, who would know at a glance which room it was they were in should they zone out in the middle of their shift. She considered how entirely real the room was to her, and how except for the smell of iodine the room could be any room in the world with a bed in it as far as the blind man was concerned.

“I’m going to turn out the light, try and get some sleep” the driver said.

“Fine.”

The driver got off the bed and walked over to the light switch by the door. She turned it out and went back towards the bed, the one closest to the bathroom, farthest from the door. She pushed the sticky knob on the base of a not-sufficiently-cleaned lamp with a garish orange shade. Her bag was on the strappy suitcase stand at the end of her bed. From it she took a zip-lock bag with a damp toothbrush inside. In the bathroom she brushed her teeth. Behind her in the dark water of the tub nothing moved. It was quiet. She turned out the light in there and took off her shoes while she sat on the side of her bed, emptying her pockets onto the nightstand first.

She swung himself into bed and went up on one elbow facing towards the blind man. On the small table between the two beds was an old mechanical clock radio,

the old kind with the digital display made by a series of numbers on printed cards. The alarm had to be set by turning two thumb-screws on the back, one for hours, one for minutes. There was a switch for AM or PM. It took her a while to figure out which way the arrow on the screws was pointed, worn as it was from use. "What time should I set the alarm for, when are we heading out?"

"Don't worry about it. We'll leave when I'm ready. I wanna see to that cow from today before we leave town."

This is not what he said earlier. The driver kept her voice calm, measured, not wanting to sound like she was nervous about the bodies they left in the woods. "You said we'd be gone before anyone..."

"I know. Just, after, that woman today..." the blind man's voice just sort of trailed off.

Alright, no alarm then. She switched off the lamp. "That sort of thing... do people..."

"Often enough."

"Sucks man." The driver felt like she had to say something, anything, make sure to express her alliance. "All she did is act the fool and just because she thought she could pull off some sort of miracle."

A deep breath washed out of the dim light from the direction of the other bed. "She didn't think nothing." The

long shaky intake of breath and slow sigh again. “That’s what faith is, mind poison. An excuse to stop thinking, faith is the opposite of thinking.”

The driver was quiet, sensing something more would be forthcoming.

“Faith is only good for anything if you don’t ask it for anything. The second you ask for something and don’t get it, that’s when you learn about faith.”

She heard the blind man roll over in the dark.

“I was small for my age to begin with. And I had a late birthday. My mother got to make the call as to whether I was going to start school then or wait till next year. Well dad was gone off to wherever dads that aren’t cut out for fatherhood go, so the sooner she had a few hours without a kid keeping her from working the better. Now at school there was no kid smaller, no kid with less, no one in better shape to be bullied than yours truly.

“That’s what happened that first day. Must of, but I don’t remember that so clear. What I do remember is sitting in our little kitchen while mom cleaned me up. I cried and wished I was bigger, wished I had a dad that could wallop that boy or that boy’s dad. I didn’t want to go back to school. Mom said I had to.

“The next morning she found a steak knife I snuck into my school bag. She let me have it, not the knife you know, and I let her know that if I had to go to school I was going to let anyone who fooled with me have it, the knife I meant. She sat me down and went back into her room.

“Came back out with a little wood box. Must of been her jewelry box or something but she opened it up and she took this little glass marble out of it that had a brass birds foot wrapped around it. It was small but it felt so big in my hand, smooth but with all these textures. It was some sort of claw-foot off of something small, to me though it was treasure. She said that a devil was trapped in the marble.

“She said my dad had trapped it there and it had to stay there ‘till the man of the house let it our. She said that there was a but though, that if I let it out it would kill. It would kill whoever touched me last. I was a kid, small for my age and dumb for it too I suppose. I had faith, a kids faith in anything a grown-up said in a serious voice. I agreed to take that trinket to school instead of the knife.

“Sure enough at school, at recess I got beat on. After, I sat there in the class with my bloody lip and my dirty shirt and when the teacher hassled me about it, accused me of fighting, when the teacher asked what happened during recess I told her.

“I said ‘a dumb son of a bitch without the sense to be scared gave me some trouble’. I said that in my squeaky little kid voice with my snot nose and my bloody lip because I had faith that if I wanted it that boy would be dead. I said bitch right there in class, right to the teacher because I had faith that if she grabbed my hand and marched me to the principal's office I could have her dead before we got there.

“It worked for me because I thought I had all the power. If I ever tried to use it, and it didn't work? Well that's what you saw today. That woman thought she had all the power, thought she was going to make the faith she had do something other than be there. That's all faiths for, bein' there. Most of the time that's enough, but people get used to it.

“The strong get used to winning, the man with his badge gets used to the weight of that gun by his side, that dumb cow got used to the belief that her life's going good 'cause of her God. Went for somethin' more than, well, you were there.”

They lay there in the dark, the two of them, in two different parts of darkness. The story strung out in the air around them, drifting around. It was a dumb story, the sort of story people only told in the dark, when no one could see their face to see how they meant it. After a long time, long

enough that she half believed the blind man might be asleep, the driver asked.

“How’d you lose it, your sight?”

“I could see just fine for a long long time. Right up until December twenty eighth nineteen ninety nine.”

“Some kind of accident.”

“Wasn’t. I had to take care of something and there wasn’t a way to do it with eyes that could see. I told you, man before me was all on board with the Jesus train? Well he wasn’t as resistant to the pull of big round numbers as you or me. Got to thinking the end of the world was coming and didn’t he just have God’s army at his call ready to boil brimstone on all those sinners.”

“How’s you going blind fit into that?”

“He was going to, well, doesn’t matter. I had to take away his army, but it can’t hear, ‘less the speaker can see it. An’ you can’t see it when there’s everything else to distract you. It’s got to be the most important thing in the world.”

The driver felt a little chill. Under the crisp worn hotel sheets, surrounded by the iodine smell. “You mean then, I... when it... I’ll have to...?”

“No. It’s the sort of thing that builds up. It’s been happening for you, I know. I can tell you hear it, sort of, don’t forget you couldn’t always. You don’t understand it yet

but that'll come, just take time. Like being a father or husband. People think out of the blue a switch trips and the most important thing in your life swaps over from yourself to your girl, or from her to your kid. It's not like that, takes time, effort. I had to speed it up so I put a pocket knife through my eyelids and swirled it around."

"Jesus! I'm sorry."

"Don't you go and get all funny on me."

"No it's just. Wow. I mean..."

"Double traumatic self enucleation. That's what it's called. It's rare, not too rare to have a technical name and common one. They call it Oedipus syndrome."

"The prince that slept with his mom?"

"Oedipal anxiety is the one everyone knows. But he gouged out his eyes too. I'm tired, let me get some sleep."

This was bad. Assuming control of it meant becoming perfectly sympathetic with it which could take years and years. Or it meant putting out your eyes to speed up the process. And speed was going to be important if the blind man really did mean to take that woman out because of her misguided performance today.

She lay in the bed for a long while after that. Listening. Listening for the slow regular breathing of someone being really asleep. She wondered if people ever

really did get to where they could tell something just by breathing. As she listened she stared up at the ceiling, taking in the dim light that crept in from the curtained window, the glow of the clock, the wash of passing car headlights. Sight was so precious.

She shuddered and her hand trembled as she closed her fingers around the little pocket knife from her nightstand.

