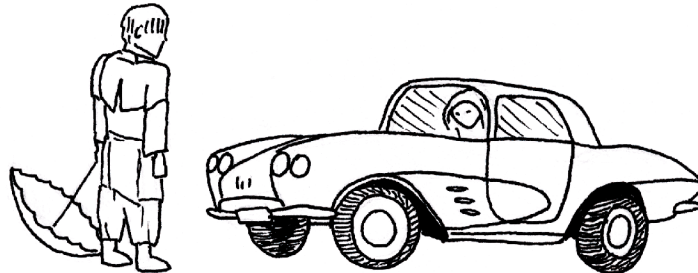


It Closed With A Click



I had a dream. I remember standing in the sand, staring at the horizon. The earth was dark, and the sky was streaked silver. There was nothing around me for a million miles. Nothing but damp sand and wind. And there, there on the very edge of sight, in the place where the sun had just set, there was a sharp little nothing, and it drew my eye, even though there was nothing to be seen. And I heard a sharp click in both ears at once. I know that sound follows sight. I learned that when I was young. I have tested it to see if it was true, and found that it was, but this sound came first. The memory of the click echoed in my ears and I held my breath, waiting for it, waiting for what would come.

The horizon jumped, and a light like the eye of God flashed from the west, and earth and sky were lost in the light, and I could feel the black shadow stretching out behind my back away into infinity.

I woke, choking on my breath, as I always did. The dream had paralyzed me, and for a moment I had to fight to regain control of my muscles. I stood, and my umbrella tumbled aside. I caught the handle before the breeze carried it away. The tarstone road had been warm when I had gone to sleep, but now I was chilled, and my clothes were damp. I closed my umbrella, and shouldered my bag of food, and began to walk down the road. The air felt like rain.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. There was a noise unlike any other I had ever heard. Soft, guttural, rising. I spun around and a car that had been sliding along the ground toward me stopped with a shrieking noise. I had never seen a car move before in my life. It hummed like a nest of hornets in hollow tube. There was a living person inside. A young woman with a hood over her head and big round orange eyes. I stared at the young woman. She was staring back at me, calmly, calmly sitting inside the car, with her hands lightly touching the arch in front of her, sitting there inside the car like she belonged there.

I put my hand on my chest and regained control of my breathing. The woman in the movable car stared at me.

Finally she moved. She pushed the side of the car and it split open. She

stepped out and stood behind the outstretched piece of the side of the car. The car was still humming.

"Are you going West?" she asked.

I shivered. Chills were climbing and falling all through my body. A car is a tomb. I remembered from my childhood on the coast, seeing the fields of cars, half submerged in sand, half submerged in the sea. Some of them had bones inside. I knew that once upon a time they could move. I knew that for every person there was a car, and the car would carry its person from place to place, but the cars were all dead, like the people. Now here was a living car humming right before my eyes, and a woman with orange eyes standing there touching it, asking me... Asking me...

"Would you like a ride?" asked the woman. "It's a long walk to nowhere at all."

I shifted my eyes from the woman's face to the car without turning my head.

"Don't be afraid of it. It's only a car. It won't hurt you. You can ride in it. See? There is another seat on that side."

My eyes flickered across the shape of the car. It was built of rusty metal, but the glass parts were shiny and clean and just a little foggy like glass will get when you take good care of it for a very long time.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to impose upon your business," continued the woman, "but if you are going anywhere the road goes, another voice would be welcome."

"Well?" she said, tilting her head. "Cat got your tongue?"

I raised a finger and tapped my lips, and then tapped the scarred skin on the front of my neck.

"Oh! Forgive me!" she exclaimed, looking away. "I didn't see."

I wanted to tell her it was nothing, and I looked at her and tried to emote it, but she was still looking away.

My eyes wandered back to the car. I thought of the row of dead cars lining the arches where one great road met another. I saw the car at the tideline that trapped the water inside when the waves drew back. I saw the ash-covered cars that filled the grid between the buildings as far as the eye could see. When I was a child I had always thought that the dead buildings had been the homes of the dead cars. They were too big to be the homes of people. I recalled my dream. I heard again the click, and then again the light that followed it. An immense light. A piercing light. But not a pure light. There were clouds in it. Dark specks, silhouetted against the light, rising like dust. I imagined that each speck of dust was a car, thrown high into the heavens.

I came to my senses and found myself looking at a world moving impossibly fast. The earth and the road became a blur as they streaked under me. It took me a moment to realize that I was sitting inside the car and looking out of the

glass. I sucked in a lungfull of air.

The woman with the orange eyes laughed. She was beside me. "Does that scare you?" she asked. "You haven't seen anything yet. We are only doing thirty-five."

The car flew faster suddenly, as if driven by her will. An unseen hand pushed my chest against the seat. I clutched my umbrella tightly.

Suddenly the world blurred behind a wall of rippling droplets.

"Oh! Rain!" said the woman. "We have to go slow, then. The wipers don't work."

The car slowed, and the unseen hand pushed me away from the seat.

The wall of droplets became raindrops on the glass. It remained transparent, but the world was distorted. The woman leaned forward, hovering her face close to the glass. I could not see clearly, but I could sense the slow movement of the car. I could feel it, and I could see the rain-shaped shadow of the world creeping by outside. I wondered what I was doing. Why was I sitting inside a car? A moving car. A moving tomb. I wondered if I was dreaming, but I knew I wasn't. Dreams felt different. This was not as bad as a dream. This was not as bad as walking down the road in the rain. This was not as bad as hiding from the rain and sleeping, sleeping to dream. The was not as bad as many things. And there was this woman. This stranger. A preciously rare other person. If only I could still talk!

I cautiously examined her, daring not to turn my head to sharply. Her full attention was focused on controlling the motion of the car. I watched her hands on the ring. She turned it just a little, sometimes one way, sometimes the other. Not in any rhythm. She seemed to be concentrating very hard. Perhaps she needed to so that the car would keep moving. I wondered if it hurt. I wondered what strength of will was required to make a car move.

I realized that she could see me looking at her. She did not look back, she kept her eyes ahead, but I could tell because her face changed a little. I couldn't guess what she was thinking, and she spoke no thoughts. What did she think of me? Why had she invited me into her car? What if I was dangerous? Why trust me? I had never in my life met a wanderer who was safe to be around, why should I be any different? Why should she be any different. She had the car. That was what made her different. When I first saw her, I did not think to fear that she was unsafe. I feared only her car, and she was like a ghost, an apparition haunting the car, only a part of it, not a person.

And that was why she did not fear me. If I was dangerous, I could not harm her. She had the car. It made her something else. Something more than a person. Something from a forgotten world, intruding into the real world. One with the will to power a car should fear nothing.

Why had she stopped for me? "Another voice" she had said. I wished I could

be another voice. I wished even for one voice. Why wouldn't she say something? Maybe the car needed her thoughts now.

I pressed my back against the seat. It was pleasant. I closed my eyes. The seat was something fully unfamiliar to me. It was both soft and firm at once. I realized that my umbrella had slipped from my hands. It was resting against my knee. I did not open my eyes, I did not search for it with my hands. I listened to the rain, and I felt the feel of the hum of the car.

I had a dream. I was sitting in the car with the woman with orange eyes. I knew her name, and she knew mine. The car was bright red. Not red like blood, but red like a flower. It was not made of rust. There were other cars all around. Everywhere. Some of them moved with us, and some of them moved against us. Some moved faster, and some moved slower, but they all moved, and they all had living people inside. We did not even look at them. They were not noteworthy. They were not significant. There were too many other cars all around to care about any of them.

We talked. Both of us. We laughed while we talked, and I remember waving my left hand as I spoke. The gesture did not mean anything. I was just doing it because the words did not mean anything either.

And underneath my words there was a little click. A single soft click. It was just enough to make me hesitate. It had not come from my mouth. It had not come from her mouth either, nor the car, nor the other cars. It had come gently from everywhere.

And the light burst from everything. In my other dream it had been the heart of a thousand exploding suns on the horizon. It had been the birth and death of every day for a thousand years. It had been blinding. It had been soul-searing.

Now it was more. The world was lost in the light. The car was gone. The woman with orange eyes who knew my name and I knew hers was gone. I was gone. The light went beyond being light. The light went beyond being. It prevented anything else from being. Before, the light had been the Eye of God. Now it was the Wrath.

I opened my eyes and sucked air into my lungs.

"Are you okay?" asked the woman, turning her head fully and looking at me.

I was sitting in the seat in the moving car. The wasteland crawled by. Nearby it flew by. In the distance it crawled by.

I breathed and blinked. The rain had stopped, and the sun was high.

"What is your name?" asked the woman.

I looked at her.

She must have seen the pain in my eyes because she looked away.

"I am going to call you Simon, okay?" She said. "I never knew anybody named Simon, but I used to get misdirected mail addressed to a Simon all the time. I always thought it was a nice name."

I did not understand at all what she had said. I tried to express my confusion with my face.

She giggled. "Oh, it's not that bad!"

I smiled, uncertain. So my name was to be Simon. It was nothing like my real name, but she was right, it was a nice name.

"So tell me all about yourself, Simon." she said, and after a pause, "I'll bet you are a firefighter from Dallas, and you were on your way to the epicenter to see if there was any way you could help out, but your truck broke down on the side of the road, and you have been hitchhiking since Tuesday waiting for someone to give you a lift. And you never thought once of turning back, because that's just the kind of person you are."

I had no idea what she was saying. Several of her words had been completely foreign to me.

"Now that umbrella. That's a tough one." she said. Now she was only touching the ring with one hand. With the other she pulled down her hood and scratched the back of her head. Her hair was dark red. The car seemed to be controlling itself without her participation. "The umbrella was given to you by your grandfather on his deathbed. He made you promise to carry it with you always, so that... um... so... That's not very good, is it?"

I looked at my umbrella. What she said about it made no sense. Nobody had given me the umbrella. I had found it in a house. That had been a good house. I found a lot of canned food there, and no bones. The coat I was wearing had come from that house too.

"I am sorry. I am babbling." Said the woman.

I wanted to tell her to keep babbling. She wasn't making any sense, but I liked the sound of her voice. It was refreshing. It hit me just how long it had been since I had listened to someone speaking. Before today, how long had it been? No! It couldn't be that long, could it?

The woman's face tightened. She swallowed. "I- I- I just don't... I mean..." she stammered. "It's all to much. I can't take it in. It doesn't seem real. You know what I mean?"

I watched her. There was a tear in the corner of her eye.

"I mean, I'm... I'm going out there to..." She stopped and started again. "I'm going out there to see it with my own eyes. I had a friend out there in Los Angeles. I mean, I never met him but we e-mailed all the time. And I.. and we. We were just friends but,... I have to go and see."

I watched the tear escape the corner of her eye and run down her face. Her eyes were ahead now.

"And he must be dead now. I mean, he must. They say the whole state is gone, and Nevada too." Her voice caught, and she sniffed and swallowed. "How could this happen? It can't be real! I can't believe that I am going to get there and

it will all be gone."

I still didn't understand her. Someone, some friend of hers had died, somehow. And some kind of place was gone somehow. Or she thought it was.

Another tear escaped her eye and followed the path of the first. I had to do something. She wasn't looking at me, so it didn't matter what kind of sympathy I emoted. I reached out my hand and put it on her shoulder.

She startled a little, and the car swerved a little. She stared at me wide eyed for a second, and then calmed. She took one hand off the ring and put it over my hand. My hand tingled.

"I'm sorry. I am so, so, so, so sorry." she said. "You must have had friends die too."

She put her hand back on the ring again. She swallowed again, and smiled at the road. I let my hand fall away. It still tingled. I sank back against the seat, and we were both quiet for a very long time. Only the car hummed.

This time my dream started with the click. The click was loud. The click was arrogant. The click knew that I feared it.

I couldn't see anything. I just waited in a void for what I knew must come next. My soul cringed and shrank in anticipation of the light.

And for a split second I could see everything before the light ripped it apart. I felt the light tear away my flesh. I felt the light burn away my bones. I felt the light sear my ashes into vapor, and I felt it spread the vapor across the whole sky. The light stripped away the earth as if the earth was only air. The light stripped away the water as if the water was only thought. The light stripped away the air as if the air had been a lie always. The light scattered me all the way around the shard of the earth.

I woke, and breathed deeply. It was dark. The car still hummed.

"Simon." said her voice. "Simon!"

I breathed evenly.

"I am worried." she said. "I am worried about how long it has been since we stopped for gas."

I turned my head. She was speaking in riddles again.

She stretched one hand through the ring and tapped the car just under the glass. "The needle still says 'Full', but I think it must be broken, because I can't remember the last time I filled up."

I looked at what she was pointing to. It was a half-circle with little lines around the upper edge.

"Keep your eyes open, and tell me if you see a gas station."

I looked out the glass to my side. I wasn't sure what she wanted me to look for. It was dark outside, and there was nothing to see. The road was no longer perfectly straight. It bent and rose and fell now.

"There might not be... there might not..." she said. Then she tilted her head.

The confusion on her face was unmistakable. The car curved and climbed as if it did not care what she said.

"I can't remember how long I have been driving, either." she said. "And I don't remember when I last stopped. I should be able to remember that. Well, I remember stopping for you, but before that..."

The car hummed. Up a hill, over, down. My stomach fluttered.

"I feel like... I feel like..."

The road ended.

The woman and the car both screamed, and the car turned sideways.

An endless instant passed.

I looked out the glass. I could see the waves crashing on the rocks far, far below. I looked at the woman with the orange eyes. Her orange eyes were closed. Her lips were trembling.

"I feel like I have done this before." she said.

Her eyes opened.

"I remember now. When I heard about it, I just got in my car, and started driving. I didn't tell my family. I didn't call work. It didn't matter if I went to work Monday, the world was ending."

She turned her head slowly and her eyes met mine. The car creaked. The waves roared below.

"I remember listening to the radio. Everyone was talking about it, and nobody knew anything. Then it happened to Europe too."

She started to cry.

"I remember changing from station to station, and listening to each station go dead one by one, until there was nothing left but a faint station playing the same mariachi song on a continuous loop. I finally had to turn it off."

The car creaked again. It was still humming. I gripped the seat with my hands.

"And I found the coast 250 miles sooner than I should have— right here. It was right here that I stopped. And I got out of my car, and I stretched my legs, and I looked."

The woman turned away from me and opened the side of the car. The car creaked.

"Nggggggg!" I said.

She got out of the car and stood on the road. I felt the car sink a hand's breadth.

And then after awhile, I got back in my car, and I kept going. Look down and you will see my car on the rocks.

I didn't want to turn my head. I didn't want to look. I turned my head and looked. There was a rusty shape, redder than the rocks. The waves washed over it.

"And I have been doing it all over and over again ever since." She took a small step backwards. Her orange eyes were focused my face.

Suddenly I could see a little of the road through her. I could see the horizon line through her.

The car creaked again, and settled a little lower, tilted a little sharper. The waves below became just a shade louder.

"I am sorry. I am so sorry. I don't know how long I have been doing this. I don't know how many times I have driven this road. I don't know how many times I have gone over this cliff."

I became conscious of the drawing of my own breath. I could hear my heart beating over the sound of the waves and the hum of the car.

"But I know I never saw you before. I know this is the first time I picked you up."

She was fading slowly. The car was slipping. I was breathing.

"I am lonely, Simon." she said, and she reach out and slammed the side of the car closed.

It closed with a click.

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