



SMALL TOWN

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I first catch sight of her in the mottled mirror behind the bar. A fragmented, snatched image dancing between the collage of bottles.

I turn slightly on the barstool to look at her, raise my voice and ask: “Fancy a drink?”

Her eyes look me over, assessing, judging. Her decision made, she walks over and sits on the stool beside me, her leg momentarily brushing mine.

“Martini. Dry,” she tells Al.

Al must know her — the drink’s under construction before she even ordered. But Al’s focus is on the two men on the corner of the bar, knocking back their ninth beer and chaser in under an hour. Al has a scent for trouble, and I trust his instincts enough to risk a look myself.

They’re a couple of rednecks, fresh from the BO charm school, dressed in their timeless uniform — checked shirt, faded jeans, synthetic cowboy boots. A baseball cap on one proclaims ‘*Progress*’. They hold their beer bottles crushed tight in over-sized hands, as if frightened someone may snatch them away like favourite toys from naughty children. They hardly speak. Their dark, wet pebble dark, eyes stare blankly, occasionally turning to roam over the bar, over the customers. But slow — real slow — like there’s something shorting and fizzing behind those blank expressions and sooner or later someone’s going to have to pay for that.

I turn back to her. Her deep brown eyes are watching me with an amused look from beneath the fringe of her thick, long, jet-black hair. She has a poise, a self-assured elegance. I sense she’s making fun of me. But she also emanates something else, something darker.

She lifts her drink and sips. And all the time her eyes remain portrait picture fixed on mine, so I figure I'd best say something.

"I'm passing through," I say. "Waiting on the weather to turn, then I'll be moving on."

She says nothing and I'm not sure what she's thinking, so I talk on.

"Started on the east coast. I'm moving westwards, no real hurry. Stopping over in places like this, places where there's time to think, time to slow down, stop rushing. Time to savour."

"Yeah, I get it. Small town slow," she says quietly and drinks again, her eyes moving away from me for the first time to consider an elderly couple rising from their table. The man, unsteady with age rather than drink, takes his wife's arm and leads her from the bar.

"I like that," I nod. "Small town slow."

Unexpectedly she smiles, a warm smile that comes from nowhere and suddenly lightens her face.

"It takes a small town. To relax."

"I thought these communities had long gone. Faded away. You forget when you're in the cities."

"Which cities?" she asks. "I can't place you."

I shrug. "Nowhere really. Too much life lost on a corporate life of flights, hotels, rental cars, meetings. One place like another, one company like another, one client like another. And then, bang, one day it's gone. Time to burn my savings and just freewheel while I get my thoughts together."

"Married?" She asks the question real casual.

"Uh-huh." I shake my head. "Came close a few times. You?"

She reaches out and runs a finger along the line of my chin. "Why don't you come back to my place?"

I feel uneasy at her directness, suddenly reminded of Dorothy Parker's comment "I loved them until they loved me." It's become a habit to spar a little, to volley flirts and innuendo back and forward, but rarely to follow through. It's more to pass the time of day, to find company while travelling.

"Sure," I say without thinking, and finish my drink.

She slips from her stool and turns away, moving towards the door and I follow, knowing I've been outmanoeuvred. I reach her side as she steps out onto the deserted sidewalk and we walk in silence for a time, her heels padding softly along the concrete.

"It's a nice evening," I say for the sake of it, but she doesn't reply.

It's a clear sky but no moon, just the stars. A million brilliant needlepoints puncturing the dark cloak of night. We reach the end of the town where the high street ends with a gas station and then yields abruptly to the dust and road, winding outwards and ever-onwards through the chain of identical small towns.

"Where we heading?" I ask.

"Like I say. My place," she replies. "It's not far."

We continue past the garage and out of town along the edge of the road. I'm uneasy but can't pin down the reason. There's something unusual about this woman, like she's as much a stranger in this town as I am. I glance back behind us, thinking I hear something, but see nothing in the darkness. I remember the simmering rednecks in the bar. What if they've followed us?

"This way." She turns away from the road and down a narrow track between the long strands of seeding grass.

I hesitate, looking back one last time towards the town. Apart from a slight ochre glow cast into the night sky it's no longer visible. I turn and follow her, feeling sober enough now that I could swear to a cop I haven't been drinking tonight. There in the starlight ahead of us is a motorhome, one of the old models with mock wooden panelling. She climbs the steps, opens the door and disappears into the interior.

I follow and step inside, shielding my eyes against the light.

"Shut the door. Drink?"

I do as she says and say "Whiskey, thanks."

I'm surprised at the mess. Everywhere I look the surfaces are cluttered with books and papers, route-maps and dirty glasses and cups and plates. The walls are lined with an embroidered dark cloth that makes the room close and claustrophobic — and intimate. Some kind of star chart, or weird astrological work, hangs from the far wall, a deep blue scattered with lines and images. To my left I can see her in the small galley kitchen and beyond that I guess there must be the bathroom and bedroom.

She comes back holding two glasses and I see she's let down her hair and changed into a dressing gown of purple and gold. She sits on the end of the small two-seater sofa and nods her head.

"Come here."

I sit beside her and take the offered glass. She raises hers, chimes the edge of it against mine.

"Health and life," she says and takes a drink, her eyes watching mine all the while. Always watching.

I look at my glass for a moment and then smile, mumble “Health and life” and take a sip. It’s good, an oak barrel matured whiskey.

“I don’t even know your name,” I say, feeling the need to say something.

She shrugs. “Does it matter? I don’t know yours. No — don’t tell me. Names don’t matter, they’re just labels. I can see you, I can talk to you, I can get to know you.” She leans closer and presses her lips against mine, full and soft, pushing her leg against me. After a time, she pulls away. “You’re nervous.” She stands and puts down her glass. “Come through when you’re ready.” And she walks towards where I guess the bedroom must be, and as she moves she lets her gown fall to the ground.

I sit there for a time and finish my drink, untangling my emotions. Finally, I switch out the light and move forwards and into the bedroom, feeling my way uncertainly in the dark. I can hear the faint sound of her breathing, regular and gentle, and use it to orientate myself. I undress and move forwards, hopelessly clumsy and awkward and cursing myself for acting like an adolescent about to experience a first fumbling sexual encounter.

Her breathing has stopped. I hesitate, losing my sense of direction, and wait, wondering what she’s doing.

“Where are you? You there?”

There’s not the slightest sound, not the slightest rustle of sheet or breath. I move forwards, feeling my way ahead with my arms.

“Hey, stop playing around will you.”

Nothing. And then there’s a soft noise, a faint footfall on carpet, somewhere to my left. I half turn, cursing the darkness.

“Is that you?”

Silence. Did I imagine it? I find the edge of the bed. I lean over, my hands moving up over its surface, fanning outwards, exploring and trying to find her. Still nothing. I climb onto the edge and move on all fours. The sheets are cool. There’s no sign she was ever here. This is crazy. Time to leave. I turn and step onto the carpet.

I’m thrown backwards onto the bed by the shock force of her body striking mine, her arms and legs wrapping tight around me, enclosing me in a pincer-grip. Her lips close on mine and seal them so tight I can’t breathe. Her fingernails dig into my back and I want to cry out, but they dig deeper still and with intense pain I feel her hands breaking through, moving *inside* me and she’s pulling at something. The breath is sucked from my body and then suddenly her grip is dropped, and she’s gone, and I lay gasping on the bed.

A light switches on and I blink. When my eyes adjust, I look down at myself. I'm covered in a layer of shining sweat. And I'm lying in blood. My blood. I sit up and look down at the soaking red sheets. I should feel shocked, but instead I feel nothing. I hear a sound and look up. She's sitting in front of me, leaning forwards in a chair, her long hair framing her face. She holds something in her hands and as I watch she holds it up in front of her.

"What is it?"

She smiles. "Your heart. Your sweet little heart."

I stare at her. The words make no sense. She's mad.

She shakes her head. "No, I'm not crazy. Didn't you feel my hands inside you? Didn't you feel me remove it? Don't you see your blood around you?"

I look again at the bloody sheets. Watching her all the while, I twist an arm behind me and explore my back. My fingertips feel the edge of a scar, a long ridge of hard tissue.

"How can it be my heart? I still live, I still breathe."

"Oh. You still breathe, yes," she says, and lowers her hands. "But you do not live."

"I don't understand."

"You're like me now," she continues. "If you want to live again, to feel again, to love again, you must help me."

I feel no emotion. No anger, no fear, no hate. What is happening? Can she possibly be telling the truth?

"I need you to find someone for me." She stands and walks over to an open chest where she takes a small framed photograph and brings it over to me. "His name's Honeywell. When you bring him to me, I shall return your heart. Until then, it's mine."

She returns to her seat and sits watching me. I look at the photograph. There are two people in the picture. One is clearly her, only younger, her arms linked with a wild-haired man with a long flowing beard. He will be easy to recognise. Like her, his eyes stare out and interrogate, pierce the viewer, somehow reminiscent of an old photograph of Rasputin.

"Why do you want him? What is he to you?"

"He belongs to me. He's wandered and I need you to find and return him."

"So go and find him yourself," I say.

"Oh, believe me I've tried," she says quietly. "But he knows I seek him. He senses me. Every time I get close, he moves on and I lose the trail. He's somewhere out there, hiding himself in these same small towns, always moving, always on the road."

I place a hand over my chest. No heartbeat. I take my pulse. Nothing. This is crazy. Is it a dream? Have I been drugged?

“What have you done to me?” I ask.

“Be grateful. It’s less than he has done to me,” she replies. “Now go find him.”

I dress hurriedly and step out from her home without saying another word. As I walk back up the path towards the road in the first grey light of dawn, I look back. But there’s nothing to see, just an ageing motorhome parked on a spare plot of land.

Back in the small motel, I shower and then arrange two mirrors so I can view my back. A large, red raw scar cuts diagonally across my skin. I shake my head. In the sanity of the daylight it all seems so unlikely. Perhaps all she has done is scratch me deeply and then fool me with some cheap magic trick. But when I check my pulse there is still nothing. I feel a coldness inside, a nothingness, can feel no sensation. She is right. I am breathing, but I no longer live. No emotion moves me, no sensation touches me.

I remember Honeywell’s face. It’s time for my search to begin.

I continue along my planned route, asking in bars and cafés, in the small boarding houses and motels that stretch across the county, convinced that that my efforts are wasted. At times I think of abandoning the search. Yet when I drink in bars, I find no satisfaction from the drinks, cannot become drunk, cannot feel any emotion towards the strangers I meet, can find no pleasure in my existence. I am somehow already punished by death, but still breathing, still thinking, still moving. If I want to live again, to love again, to feel again, my search has to succeed.

As I move through the small towns, asking questions about Honeywell and drinking, and not becoming drunk, and trying and failing to find comfort in the company of strangers, I slowly become cold-shouldered. People become uneasy at my presence, ask me to leave bars and motels because of the chilling effect I have on other customers. I am living, and yet without life. Weeks pass, and then months, and still no-one has seen Honeywell, or leastways, no-one prepared to tell me about it. I let it be known I’ll pay a reward, a good reward. When no-one bites, I increase the bait. Still no-one bites.

A deadbeat Sunday in a town hundreds of miles from where I started, I finally think I’ve struck lucky. I’m sitting at one of the few bars where my custom is still good when a guy comes over and leans on the counter beside me and tells me to buy him a drink if I want some information. I call him over a rye, and he drinks it in one, turns, tells me to meet him outside and walks out. I finish my drink and hurry after him, relieved that my luck may have finally broken.

The guy's waiting outside on the boardwalk. When he sees me, he waves for me to follow him and we walk along at a swift pace.

"What do you have?" I ask, impatient for news.

"Everything you've been asking for." And he walks more quickly so that he's slightly ahead of me, making any more conversation awkward.

I wonder what I shall say when I see Honeywell, how I can persuade him to come back with me. If he doesn't want to come, there's no way I can coerce him — unless I hire help.

We turn a corner and there's a small group of rednecks waiting for me. Before I can react, they turn on me, pulling out baseball bats and striking me again and again, kicking at me, calling me all sorts of names and insults. I can't fight back. To fight I would need to feel something. Anger, fear, a defence instinct. But I feel nothing. I'm just an observer. They lay into me and I feel no pain, but my body bleeds and bruises appear. They work themselves into a frenzy, angered by my lack of reaction. It's ruining their sport. Bullies just love to see fear in their victim's eyes, to hear them cry out for mercy. And only when I pass out and fall into the gutter at the side of the road do they finally finish their noble sport and move off, back to the bar where they can toast their heroism and that glorious licking they gave the stranger from the city.

When I wake it's evening. Even in this small town people hurry by, thinking I'm a bum, just another drunk who's taken more than he can handle. I pull myself to my feet and drag myself back to the boarding house where I collapse onto my bed. In the morning it's difficult to move, but I force myself into the bathroom and under a cold shower. Afterwards, I collect my things and check out. In my pick-up I take my old Colt from the dash and put it in my jacket. I feel no desire for vengeance. It just makes sense to be ready.

The trail begins again. My cash begins to run low. The time's approaching to make a decision. In my original plan I'd have reached the west coast by now and thought about taking casual work, bar work, playing background mood piano, whatever was going. Unless Honeywell showed up soon, I'd forget the whole thing and head out west like I'd intended.

It was a Wednesday in a place small enough not to be called a town at all — a general stores, garage, bar and row of concrete buildings — when I found myself staring at a man sitting with a girl in the corner of the bar. He isn't like the photo. He's clean shaven with a prominent chin and a tidy head of hair. But when he turns briefly to look towards the bar, I realise what it is.

The eyes. There was no mistaking them.

It's Honeywell.

I was in no hurry and they clearly weren't either, so I ordered myself up another Scotch and sat watching them over the camouflage of the local newspaper. The girl was older than him, a straw-coloured blonde with a tiny waist. Occasionally I could hear them laugh, him gruff and short, her sharp and nasal. I waited, drinking Scotch after Scotch to match their own drinking while all the time I remained sharp and sober and as dull as shit and they became ever more raucous and fun and more publicly intimate. Finally, they rose unsteadily from their chairs and moved slowly across the bar where they became entangled in the swing door, collapsing with laughter. As they left, I cleared my tab and followed them.

They climbed into a beat-up old Chevy and I followed them in my pick-up, watching at a distance as they drove drunkenly along the narrow dusty road out of town. I'd already decided persuasion wouldn't work. I had to kidnap him. After a time, they turned off onto an old farm track and I parked my car by the side of the road and followed on foot. At the far end of the track there was a small wooden and brick shack, the Chevy parked outside. There was no sign of Honeywell or his companion. I approached the front door to find it ajar. There was the faint sound of voices and laughter and I pushed the door open and moved inside, finding myself in the kitchen.

I sat down at the old wooden table and poured myself a drink from the jug of warm cider. I could hear them in the bedroom, the soundtrack of their enjoyment reaching me through the walls. I could wait. I had another drink and then one more, draining the last from the jug, and it was only then that the door from the bedroom opened and Honeywell came into the room.

He stopped as soon as he saw me, surprised to find this stranger in his home.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"Who is it?" came a cry from the bedroom.

He turned. "Be quiet and stay put. It's nothing." He reached out and for a moment I thought he was grabbing a weapon. I moved my hand to my jacket pocket. Instead, he pulled a dressing gown into sight and slipped it on. He closed the bedroom door and moved to sit on the chair opposite, took the jug and started to pour.

"I'm sorry," I said, as nothing came from the jug. "I finished it. Thirsty."

He set the jug down and stared at me, his deep penetrating eyes cutting straight through me. "She sent you."

I nodded.

"Now what?" He leaned back in the chair until the wood creaked. "You gonna take me by force? I'm not going back. She's in the past."

“She wants you,” I said.

“Uh-huh,” he shook his head. “Not wants. She *needs* me. It’s not going to happen. I’m happy here.”

“You have to come,” I stated. “She’s taken something of mine. Something I’d like back.”

He stared at me. “Then she hasn’t changed. How did you meet my sister?”

“Your sister?” If I’d been capable of feeling surprise I would have been surprised. But I should have known from that photograph — it was there all the time right in front of me. In their eyes.

“She didn’t tell you that? I’m her brother, not her lover if that’s what you thought. That’s not why she needs me. But you met her, you saw what she could do on her own. When it’s the two of us, we can join our powers together. That’s what she wants, that’s what she needs.”

“You have similar powers?” For a wild moment I thought maybe I could ask him to return my heart.

“Yeah. Well, maybe. I don’t know. I don’t use them no more. When I was younger, I loved them, but then I learned they gave me nothing. They’re not good powers. But my sister don’t care. She has ideas, big ideas, mad ideas, and she needs me to help her. On her own she’s a nuisance, but too weak to cause any real damage.” He stopped and considered me. “So now what?”

“I don’t know,” I replied. “But if I don’t take you back with me, she’ll never return what’s mine.”

“And if you do take me with you, she’ll take the rest of you anyhow,” he said quietly. “She never keeps her word. You can’t trust her. She took the wrong path a long time ago. She has no interests but her own.”

I thought a while. “Perhaps there’s another way. If I return and tell her you’re dead. If I find a grave and take her to that perhaps she’ll realise there is no hope, that she can never achieve her ambition.”

“Maybe,” he said. “I don’t know her any more. She’s drifted, become a stranger to me. I can’t predict how she might react. She’s not the person I once knew.”

For a moment I thought of killing him, of taking his body back to his sister. But the insanity passed. I rose to my feet. He stood to face me, and I noticed now I was right up close to him how like his sister he looked.

“I need to believe you,” I said.

“The choice is yours,” he stated quietly. “But if you try to take me to her, or to take my life, I shall resist you.”

“I can’t fight you.” I turned, about to walk away, and then stopped and looked back at him. “You know how long I’ve been looking for you?”

He nodded. “I knew from the first week. But if you’d found me too soon, you would’ve done what she asked. Time changes people. You’ve had time to think and reflect.”

“You let me find you?”

He nodded.

I stepped out from the shack and walked back to my car. Over the next week I drove slowly towards the small town where it all started. The further I drove from the small shack and the nearer I came to her, the less certain I became of what I’d done. What chance was there now of her returning my heart, what hope of becoming whole again? But there had to be hope. If her brother could turn his back on the darkness of their powers, then so too could she. When I told her he was dead, when she could see there was no hope, surely there was no reason for her not to return me to the way I had been before?

So now I drive through the town without stopping, both surprised and pleased to see it again, like rediscovering a place visited once in childhood and only half-remembered. I park my car beside the small track and as I walk down and into the clearing the door of the motor home opens and I climb up and step inside.

“Shut the door,” she says. “And what would you like to drink?”

“A Scotch,” I say.

She brings out two glasses and sits on the sofa. I move over and sit beside her and take the drink. She lifts it and about to make a toast, I stop her and say “Health and life.”

She smiles and says “Well?”

“He’s dead,” I say. “I’ve found his grave. I’ll take you there.”

She stares at me for a time and then stands and paces slowly up and down, lost in her own thoughts.

“I asked you to bring him to me, not news of his death.”

“It wasn’t easy to find him,” I say, sticking to the truth where I can. “I was set upon and attacked. I’ve done as much as I can. Now please keep your part of the bargain and return my heart.”

She nods and finishes her drink. “Come into the bedroom.”

I breathe deeply. It's nearly over. Soon I can leave and put this weird, unworldly episode behind me. I follow into the bedroom, but this time there's enough light creeping in through the blinds for me to see her in the gloom, waiting for me in her bed. I undress and slip between the sheets. She comes closer to me until I feel her warmth and the softness of her skin against mine. I start to relax as she runs her hands over my body, through my hair and down my neck over my chest. Any moment now, I think, any moment now and I shall be complete again. I shall be me again.

Suddenly pain shoots through me as her fingers claw at my back. I resist the temptation to pull away, controlling myself, telling myself I need to endure this to have my heart returned. But something's wrong. She's not returning anything. I try to push her away, but she's stronger than me. I sense her hands entering me, exploring me, but this time she doesn't stop, she doesn't take anything from me. Instead, more and more of her is inside me until I realise the whole of her is inside me, her voice inside my head, her thoughts taking over and subduing mine.

She has possessed me. She *is* me.

And yet still I'm not dead. I have become a powerless silent observer in my own body. Even now I watch mutely as she drives my pick-up back towards that small shack where her brother lives with his girlfriend. And I keep seeing before me, played over and over again like a replay on a video, the door opening as she approaches, her brother stepping out to greet me, surprised I have returned.

But beyond that I can't see. Beyond that there is nothing for me to see.