

The Marks On The Roads

a sf short story

by John T. Cullen

The Marks On The Roads

The skid marks were on roads all over America, maybe the world, but when Mick's brother decided they would jump bail, skip the rent, and cruise out of town at two in the morning, the marks were on the roads but not on Mick's mind. As they loaded the car under a moonless sky, he was more concerned that a police cruiser might suddenly rush to a stop. Strangely though, the neighborhood dogs weren't even barking. An otherworldly silence filled the air as the trio made stealthy trips back and forth to the car, packing up all their possessions.

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Mick had first seen the house a year and a half ago.

It was on Cartwright at Bolton, a T-intersection defined by a pair of tarry wooden masts weighted down with armored cabling and scarred by generations of linemen's heel picks. When Mick first arrived at Cartwright & Bolton, his art and architecture training popped into gear. He recognized immediately that breed of American home, common as house cats and just as distantly lovable. With slight variations in trim, the houses were all old, slathered with eons of paint until the edges were softened. No. 14 Cartwright had a particularly industrial coating of battleship gray, layered on by a tipsy handyman in surplus Navy paint. Mick stood with his easel and suitcase on the archipelago of humped soil. Wind ruffled his hair and the unkempt grass and the surrounding lake of muddy puddle water. Mick wanted to turn away when he heard his older brother's harsh voice yelling at maybe a dog; or was it his wife Mary.

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The marks were all over America, maybe the world, but Mick hadn't traveled that far. Not yet, he thought glowing inside as he tiptoed down the night path to the car. He carried his easel under one arm and his suitcase in the other hand. One day he would sell his paintings in New York and London and Rome, but for now he had to rely on his older brother's sense of practical survival.

Lisa, his fiancée, and Ben, his older brother, were in the car already. Ben had unscrewed the dome light so they were less likely to be seen in the dirt driveway between the darkened houses. It was a moonless night, but the sky was clear and starlight cast a mercurial glow. Mick recognized Lisa's shadow by the big frizz of beautiful hair. The other, lumpier shadow, was Ben, hunched in the rear seat. When Mick drew closer, he saw in the light of a street lamp that Ben was just rolling up his .38 revolver in a white linen cloth.

"Hurry," Lisa whispered to Mick.

Mick slipped open the trunk (again, Ben had unscrewed the bulb there, and Mick had to feel around, pushing pillows this way and blankets that way to make room for his easel and suitcase. Cosmetics rattled faintly in a cardboard box, and Mick inhaled the mingled fragrance of their life together -- Lisa's flower perfume, Ben's assertive Tycoon aftershave, Mick's woodruff deodorant. His paints and a few other possessions were already stashed. As he closed the trunk lid, Mick cast a regretful glance back at

the house that had been his home -- their home -- for nearly a year.

"Hurry!" growled Ben.

The house was a Victorian four-family structure. If its gingerbread decorations had once stood out amid gables and cornices. The landlord was a 30-year Navy veteran with a slim frame, red face, and piercing menthe eyes. The more the three got behind in rent, the fiercer the landlord's eyes became, and the redder his complexion.

"Honey," Lisa pleaded. "Mickey, we've got to get out of here." He loved her voice, though sometimes it could be used to express petulance, disapproval, even momentary cruelty. She had a fine voice; and it added to Mick's ardor that she'd sung backup to a rock band that had later been on national TV. They could make love and listen to her singing; they could time their climaxes in the old whispering house, with time suspended, just she and Mick, he tangled in her long, thin white limbs while she moaned and thrashed.

Mick cast yet another glance back at the house. On the second floor beside them lived two sisters. One was Em, paraplegic and confined to a wheelchair. The other was Monica, a stunning beauty who, in his painterly opinion, might not have the body of a Lisa, but Lisa's face was plain compared to the luminous beauty of Monica's. Mick felt a mixture of longing and guilt, knowing he'd never see either one of them again. He felt torn and frustrated, because he had dreamed of painting Monica. And that seemed to be how life went, this constant moving on.

"Hurry, Mickey!" No petulance this moment, just urgency.

* * *

Soon after Mick moved in, Mary left Ben. He'd thought he'd heard Ben hitting her -- he'd heard something like slapped flesh late at night after an argument, bookended by shrieks before and after, and punctuated by the slam of a door as she went to her car and went to some bar to hang out until after closing. Ben couldn't afford to hang out, because he went to work each morning at six. "I never touched her," Ben grumbled the one time Mick asked about it. They stood in the kitchen late one evening. Mick had come downstairs from his easel to get a cola. Mary had run out to a bar after an argument. Ben polished off a couple of beers before going to bed. Where Mick was a small, wiry, dark-haired man of 25, Ben was a huge, muscular, balding brunet with wild cracked-gray eyes that could transfix a person with their threat of mayhem. Mick had never been able to stand up to him; he was just grateful to have a place of refuge after losing his own apartment and being turned down in the master's program for painters at art school. It afforded him a chance to pick up the pieces, start over. Perhaps there would be room in the art program next year; he was on the waiting list. And perhaps he should apply at universities in other cities.

The matter of applying in other cities kind of went around the corner when he'd met Lisa. That was in a bar called Apples & Oranges down the street from Cartwright and Bolton. Mick was in a good mood, having finished a set of watercolors rich with Arizona sunshine; he'd well captured the oppressive heat, the scoured landscape, the rusty colored hills. He'd show it to a savings and loan officer next week in the hope of selling the set for about two thousand bucks; that would do wonders for his meager income from the convenience store, which was measured in minimum wage per hour of drudgery, when he could get sufficient hours to hand over to Ben his share of the rent.

She had this ball of frizzy hair the color of dry mahogany. Of course everyone looked different in bars at night, but she didn't. Mick drifted toward her, on the half-hearted hope of a conversation. She was tall, and thin, with seductive blue eyes and a mischievous grin. She wore makeup well, just enough, dark

almost black red on the lips, light shadowing in the orbits of her eyes, a little mascara to add definition to her eyebrows. She had nice white teeth and gleamed as the red lips wrinkled into a wry smile, this way and that. She was one of those women, Mick decided, who were sexy without really being pretty. Her face was narrow and long. She had huge round cheekbones and gaunt cheeks. Her chin and jaw and mouth had a kind of square set to them. Her nose was fleshier than she might have wanted it to be, but she could lower her gaze and look up, with one seductive eye making a sunset over the bridge of that nose, and already Mick (with a buzz on) wanted to kiss her. She said "Hi" and he began to think it would be easy. Which was fine that evening, because he felt good and relaxed and wasn't up for any more hard work.

"What do you do?"

"I'm a painter."

"Oh how fun. What do you paint?"

"Just about anything. Landscapes. Still lifes. You. I'll paint you."

"Oh that would be fun."

They wound up in bed together at his place that night. She was passionate and always ready for more.

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Morning light slatted in through the venetian blinds, illuminating the bumps in her spine as she bent over to pull on her high heeled shoes. She wore only dark blue briefs. Her small breasts had sharp pink nipples and wobbled as her fingers made quick motions around her feet. How long her back was, he thought, how narrow and delicate, as he lay in bed idly running his fingertip up and down her back, in and out of the shadow deeps and almost glowing high points. A complex composition, he thought, filling in a variety of skin tones from chocolate for shades through pinks for warmth and buttercreams for skin so fine you could see the pores. Hard to do in watercolor, but he was that good.

"What are you doing?" she asked with a little laugh. She arched this way and that, pulling sheer hose up.

"I'm painting you."

"Already?" She snapped upright, raised long arms, dropping the black sheath over herself. She wriggled her narrow waist, her not much wider hips, this way and that. The dress sighed down her skin, extinguishing a last glimpse of thin, firm hips.

"I've got the colors picked, but I need to see you again to sketch."

She sort of half corkscrewed down, wobbling skillfully on her heels, and took his face in both hands.

"That's so sweet of you. I can come back anytime you like."

"Where are you staying?"

"With a couple of friends."

"How about this evening?"

She swung her purse, one hand on the doorknob already. "Let's meet at Apples & Oranges. I like to have a drink or two. Then you can paint me with a glow in my cheeks."

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They saw a lot of each other, and soon she moved in. She was a singer, she told him; picked up some good money as a cocktail waitress. He went to hear her sing, and that was great; she had him on the stage, introducing him as the great Mick, painter we are going to all be hearing from. He went to the airport cocktail lounge, and that wasn't so great, watching her elegant figure float amid the tables while huge airplane tails lumbered by outside, and she flirted constantly with all the men; Mick left early.

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He painted her, and she loved the attention. She would assume any pose he wanted, for example on the dresser, wearing only a bikini, holding the edges with her strong little fists, extending her impossibly reachy legs to one side entwined, while her small tight butt rested on the doily. She had the patience of a model, and he began to feel really excited about her. They'd be walking arm in arm on the street at night, and he'd have a vision of how he wanted to paint her next, and they'd hurry back home, up the creaky wooden stairs, down the dark hallway, to his room where he'd peel away her clothes and show her how he wanted her to sit on the bed.

While he painted her one spring night, Ben and Mary had their final argument and Mary left. She never came back. He heard the door slam, heard her cursing in the driveway, heard the poorly muffled engine of her car roar away down the block.

A day or so later Ben knocked on Mick's bedroom door. Lisa was away at work. It was late in the afternoon, and Mick had been distracted by the noise coming from a moving van and a crew of men next door. "Mickey, we gotta talk." Ben sat down on the bed, looking weary and disheveled. He looked big and old and worn out in his sweaty tank top undershirt. "Now I been good to you, right?"

"Sure, Ben." He washed out his paintbrushes.

"Mary ain't coming back. I figure she's going to hire a lawyer when she can afford it and get a divorce."

"I'm sorry -- ."

Ben held up his hand. "No, no. It's meant to be. We can't get along." He rose and stuck his hands in his pockets. "In the meantime, Mickey, there's something I am mighty embarrassed to ask. I feel real low about it. I'm ashamed, but I got no choice."

"Whatever you need, Ben, I'm your brother."

"You're a good man, Mickey. Say, here's what I need. You and Lisa here, you're not exactly getting rich, I know, but you're steady. I'm just in the middle of getting my ass kicked and all. What do you say we split the rent three ways until I can get it together again?"

"Sure, Ben. I'll talk to Lisa. I'm sure she'll understand." It seemed reasonable. He only kicked in about a quarter of the rent, and Lisa wasn't paying anything.

Later that night, when they were in bed together, Mick remembered about the rent and told her. The window was open, and Cartwright and Bolton was quiet except for a chorus of crickets. She touched his nose thoughtfully. "I'll have to see, Mickey."

He felt a thrill of alarm. "If you can't -- ."

"I'll have to check my savings, Mickey, and figure out what I've got coming in."

"It was dumb of me to -- I'll tell you what -- forget I ever mentioned it." He felt like a fool. What right did he have to ask her for money? He felt almost, well, in love with her, and he didn't want to make things

difficult for her. Didn't want to lose her. That would make things difficult for himself. He reached over to kiss her, but she had turned her face away. "Night, Mickey," she whispered, lightly reaching up to touch his cheek with her fingertips. The long red nails rasped on his skin, and he caught her fingers in his hand and kissed them.

* * *

The next afternoon before she went to work, Mick did hear her speaking with Ben. Their voices were even, and muffled, not because they had anything to hide, but because Mick was upstairs painting and they were downstairs in the kitchen. It sounded like a matter of fact conversation -- two adults talking, discussing things sensibly, making a deal. Sounded like she'd pay a third of the rent after all, without further prodding, and that made Mick sigh with relief. He wasn't bringing a whole lot in.

That was the afternoon he saw Monica and Emma for the first time. So that was the reason for the large van outside the past day or so. In the house next door, on the second floor, all the windows were wide open. There were no curtains yet. The furniture stood in clusters. Boxes stood stacked, waiting for unpacking, sorting, putting away of their contents.

Two women moved about, one in a wheelchair. Mick was distracted from his work, curious, nosy, just interested peripherally. Then the other woman leaned out the window, and Mick's heart skipped a beat. She was incredibly beautiful. Not leggy and tall like Lisa, but more petite. Not loungy in black dresses like Lisa, but neat and preppy. She didn't have a musky frizz ball, but straight hair that gleamed like ribbon candy, butterscotch, golden, as it hung straight down and was cut with precision in a line just touching her shoulders all around. Her face was exactly proportioned, in soft lines, not hard like Lisa's. As a painter, Mick knew lines. Most women could emphasize their features by losing weight to bring out more sharpness, more bonyness. It made them look younger. This woman simply had the right lines. She had a full, rich mouth; no lipstick, just the natural caramel color. Her cheeks tapered nicely, from slight dimples by the mouth up to full cheekbones that were understated and soft but there. The cheekbones in turn rose softly on the outside of each eye. The eyes were direct, and firm, and humorous. There was no hardness in them, no calculation, no scheming for next month's rent or the next meal. This woman came from money, Mick thought, and sure enough, he saw her later in the day driving off in a green Jaguar with caramel leather upholstery.

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Mick was so excited he came home tripping over the cracks in the sidewalks. Ben was in the kitchen having a beer while packing gunpowder into his casings. That meant he'd be going hunting soon, Mick knew.

Mick ran up the stairs. Lisa was still asleep, though it was noon. Must have closed the bar last night, as the expression went; which meant she'd stayed a good hour or more after, helping to clean up, count the change, divide up the tips. "Lisa! Lisa!"

"Mmm, Mickey, I'm sleeping."

"Lisa, I did it. I sold the paintings. Eight watercolors. Biggest sale I ever!" He swallowed hard, saliva fighting with words to get out. "Two thousand four hundred bucks! The bank bought them. I'm going to go to grad school next year for sure."

Lisa yawned. "That's great, Mickey." She stretched. "Good work, my man!"

He kissed her, and she squealed as he struggled under the covers with her. It was good to sell paintings. It was good to make love. "Oh," she said, "easy, easy," but she closed her eyes and fell back into a half

sleep. He rocked steadily against her, an easy pleasure, gently butting the breath out of her each time he landed, and she put her arms behind her head, eyes still closed, and groaned pleasurably. He finished, squatting with her legs around his waist, and she gave a little pleased smile. "That was nice," she said.

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Mick set up his easel and put a new canvas in place while she dressed for work. "I'm going to pick up my part of the rent," she said. "It's only fair."

"Thanks." He still felt lame about having asked her. Somehow, something cold and gray had made its way into their relationship. Business. He wished he'd never asked.

"I'll be home late," she said, giving him a peck on the cheek before clattering down the stairs on her heels. He heard her knock on Ben's door. The door opened. They had another conversation, not muted, but not understandable. Then Lisa went loudly out the front door. He watched her fumble for her keys, get into her battered car with the rusty fender, and drive off.

* * *

Days went by. Each day, he'd see the women next door. He longed to speak with the pretty one. They had curtains now. He longed to see what they'd done with their furniture. Ben was away for a few days, he didn't know just where, and Lisa was off to work. Mick took one of his paintings, a small water color, a quick sketch of some red, white, and blue flowers in a crystal vase, and went across. He rang the upper door bell. A woman said "Yes?"

"I'm your neighbor. I brought a housewarming present."

"How thoughtful."

He went up the stairs and knocked in a shadowy hallway.

"It's open."

He pushed the door open and was surprised at how elegant they'd fixed everything. The apartment smelled clean. It smelled pleasantly of oranges and lemons and coffee and flowers. "Hi, my name is Em." The woman in the wheelchair extended a hand. She had a plain, chubby face, very sweet and pleasant, and had honey golden hair twisted up in a bun. "That's short for Emma. I apologize for the mess. Wow, look at that pretty watercolor. Did you do that?"

"Yes. It's nothing. You can have it if you like. I just sold a set of eight paintings to Presidential S & L. You can see them starting next month, after they're framed."

"That's wonderful, Mr. -- ."

"Thompson. Mick Thompson. I live just across the yard there."

"Oh yes, I've seen you. I look out the window, you know. I'm a nosy person. I've seen you at your easel."

Mick reddened. Had she seen him staring at her roommate? "So what do you do, Em?"

"Well, I didn't work for a while after the accident. I was a ballerina."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I taught for a while afterward, but it isn't the same when you can't move around, show them the steps. Now I just do business on the internet." She pointed her chin toward an expensive looking bank of computer equipment. "I'm a stockbroker. Spend all my time on the phone, on line, same thing." She laughed.

"Well who knows," Mick said moving toward the door. "Maybe one of these days I'll have money to invest and I can get you to do your magic." He wanted to get out, away. It wasn't that her disability made him uncomfortable. It was the desire to see her sister. That made him feel uncomfortable. Guilty. Toward Lisa.

Em rambled on: "I won't bore you. I talk to people all day. It's a rare treat to get to see one in the flesh though." She laughed again.

"Well, I'm over there most days," Mick said, "so if you need anything, feel free to call."

"Thank you, that's nice. You should come again," Em said. "My sister Monica teaches French at the college, and then she's taking pottery classes in the evenings. Will you stay for coffee?"

"No thanks. I've got to finish a painting I'm working on."

She wheeled herself to the door. "Please come again, Mick. I don't get many visitors, so please drop in as often as you like." The several pleases, and the light in her eyes, told him that she already had a crush on him. That would make it easy to come over, though that might be using her, and the thought pained him, but he did really want to see her sister. Maybe just to paint her, maybe actually to fall in love, he wasn't sure.

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Mick felt bleak for some reason as he walked alone toward the diner down the street. The sun was close to setting. There was an industrial, grimy pink light that settled on everything, made everything wan. Took the music out of children's yelling. Made men and women seem plain and drab. Here he was, having this sexual affair with Lisa, who was a cypher but such a woman; and he was artistically in love or in lust or whatever insane thing with this other cypher, Monica. He'd made the sale of his life and he felt anxiety about making the next one, but that wasn't it, it was the tugging in his heart, this way and that, that made him feel so bleak.

He heard a car horn and looked over to see a big, square car rolling along side of him. Thin shadowy man driving. Beefy man in his fifties, gray hair, suit, gray silk tie, took off a pair of prescription sunglasses and said: "Your name Thompson?" The men stayed in their car.

Mick nodded. He was puzzled. He waited while the car rolled up to the curb. The man had a mean face, full of wrinkles and little blebs. He had little gray teeth with smoky cracks in them, and the tops where all brown with rot. He had hard, fat hands, but the black holder that flipped open revealing a worn brass badge with blue lettering interested Mick more. "Sergeant Jones, police department. You Michael Thompson?"

"Yes."

"You seen your brother Ben around?"

"Not the last few days."

"Yeah, well I'm not surprised because he's sitting in jail. You don't look like you hang around jails, do you?"

"No, but -- ?"

"Your brother Ben is a f-- ." He paused, a look of contempt in his eyes. Mick cringed. Jones continued: "-- a fairly interesting chap. An interesting chap indeed. Do you know that he has a sheet as long as my arm?"

"I know he had some troubles in the past, but -- ."

"We had several complaints about him beating up his wife, throwing her down some stairs, threatening to kill her. Is this the Ben you know?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

Jones smiled coldly. "I must have a vivid imagination. Well, I'm not imagining that he beat a man up in a bar. Claimed the guy owed him money. Almost killed the guy, although he's recovering from a fractured skull. Hit his head on the bar going down. True to form, the judge is just now letting Ben go free on bail until his trial for attempted murder."

"My brother works for a living. Gets up every day."

"I know this, son. He's a hard working stiff. I checked that out, and sure enough, he's on the level there. Only problem is that the machine shop where he works is a mafia front where not only do they make really good rebuilt engines, but they also launder all the payola and protection money from every cigarette machine in this county. And do you know what? Dear Ben went out and broke a guy's arm about a month ago, collecting."

Mick sighed. "Okay, so what do you want from me?" He loved his brother. Had loved him all his life. Had heard stories like this on and off over the years. Never amounted to anything. He just ignored them and the stories went away. Ben was rock solid, always there, strong, always when you needed him.

"Try to reason with the dear one. I'd like to see him turn state's evidence. Clean his record. He'll be well protected, and he'll have a fresh start in life. We'd like to put away the people he works for."

"I'll tell him about your offer."

Jones found a toothpick in his shirt pocket and pointed it at Mick before sticking it in his mouth. "It's an offer now. It'll be charges in a couple of months."

The cops drove off and Mick forgot the conversation as soon as the diner came in sight.

* * *

Ben came home carrying a canvas bag with his shaving things in it, his underwear, a prison Gideon, that kind of thing. Mick hugged him in the hall, and Ben hugged him back. "They're framing me, Mickey. They're framing me, and I can't do nothing about it. They have all the power. What are people like you and me and Lisa compared to that?"

Mick felt sorry for his brother. He felt sorry for Ben's fears and delusions and paranoia. Their father had beaten Ben regularly, and their mother had thrown him out for smoking a little marijuana. They'd gone a lot easier on Mick, although the old man had made fun of him and said he looked like a faggot when he was proud for winning first place in a city-wide art fair. Ben had stood up for him.

Mick told Lisa about it late that night and she rolled her eyes up. "Oh no!" She took off her false eyelashes and slipped into bed with him. He shuddered at her cold legs and hugged her to warm her.

"Your brother cannot keep his act together," she told Mick. "Listen, Mickey, I've been thinking. What do you say we split for California?"

Mick shook his head. "Huh?"

"California." She cupped his privates in her hands and stroked them seductively. "We can make a real life for ourselves. Get a house. Not live in a spare bedroom no bigger than a closet. You could have a room all to yourself for painting."

"Ohhhhh," he sighed, writhing pleasurably. "What about money?"

She shrugged, kissed his nose. "There's always money. Besides, you'll be selling your paintings soon."

"What about Ben?"

"Ben can take care of himself."

"We leave him here? Ohhhhhh -- ."

"Ben has his own life to live."

"Ohhhh..."

* * *

Just my luck, Mick thought, it always gets good just before I leave. Em had invited him up to meet her sister Monica, who had the day off. He trudged up the stairs, carrying two bouquets of flowers he'd bought with a two-for-one coupon at a liquor store.

"Hi," Em said loudly as he pushed the door open. "Oh look at that! Always has a little present."

Mick walked over and handed a bouquet to Em, who beamed with her plain, sweet face.

"Monica, our visitor is here!"

Mick heard a rumbling on their large wooden balcony. Through lace curtains he glimpsed sunglasses, perfect hair, an unsmiling face, a beautiful face. Monica was putting on a white, too-large man's shirt.

"She's out there getting some sun," said constant Em, never jealous or begrudging.

Mick caught a glimpse of an expensive tartan-plaid bikini, small perfect breasts, an innie navel in a peach belly, and neat small legs in a neat small figure. Then the shirt covered everything and Monica pushed the back door open. She raised her sunglasses and looked at the total stranger standing by her sister, who appeared to have a crush on this person. Or so Mick read it.

"Hello."

"Mick is going to have coffee with us. I had the grocery man bring some donuts along with the weekly things. Sit down, you two. Stop milling around."

Mick sat in a comfortable chair and was amazed at the contrast between the two sisters. Em gushed warmly and pleasantly. Monica glanced several times at an ivory watch on a leather band the color of blood. Within fifteen minutes they'd had their coffee and a donut. Monica, with her perfect 16-year-old body on a 26-year-old woman, cleaned up, offered more coffee, and then picked up a paperback. "You two enjoy your visit. I'm going to go back out in the sun. Nice meeting you, Nick."

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After extricating himself with many promises that he would never keep, to visit often and bring more of his work, Mick returned to Ben's house and sagged with relief. Perhaps in time he'd get Monica to let down her pretensions, her guard, her reserve. In time maybe on a lonely evening when she was dumped by the lawyer or doctor she was preserving herself for -- that's right, Mick thought, or a frigging cardinal on the slum, what did he know -- she must sleep in formaldehyde every night.

Ben called him into the kitchen. "Mickey boy, I got a proposition to make. You don't understand about these things, but I'm in trouble with a lot more than some fat stupid cops. They want me to turn on my associates, and my associates do not take kindly even to such suggestions. I know the people I work with. Fuck around they do not do. Ever. En, Oh. As far as they are concerned, and they know about this of course since they own people highly placed among our city's finest, as far as they are concerned, I am now somewhere they do not want to do business. I'm marked, in other words, Mickey. Some night I'm walking home with a bag of fast food, minding my own business, and this car drives by, bang bang, I land in the gutter, french fries all over the place, and that's it. The red shit won't be ketchup. It's me, bleeding up my life, all for some fat stupid cop." He gripped Mick's shoulders and shook them powerfully. "I won't let them do it to me, Mickey. I won't let them do it to me." He slapped Mick's cheek lightly. "What do you say we take off. Go back east. Maine, maybe. Lots of woods there. Snow twenty feet deep in winter. Nobody'll come looking for me there. You come along, keep me company."

"What about Lisa?"

"You bring her along if she wants. You can paint. Take your time, put your life together, take off when you're ready. Say, you in love with her?"

"Yes." He thought of Monica, and said: "Yes, very much."

* * *

Lisa threw a shoe. "I am not going to Maine. NOT. You want to go to Maine, Mickey, you and that lump you call a brother, you go right ahead. I'm leaving for California tomorrow." In tears, she sprang up, wearing only panties, and started packing her suitcase. By now, she'd accumulated several cardboard boxes of more stuff. The pink nipples waggled as she make quick angry motions shoveling paperbacks and lipsticks and cigarette packs into a box.

Mick sat back holding his head. "Oh my God. Lisa, no, please. I love you. Wait, let me go talk with Ben."

"I don't give a shit about Ben!" she shrieked as he ran out of the room.

He went downstairs and knocked on Ben's door. "Hey Ben."

"Yo."

"I gotta talk with you."

"Come in." He went into Ben's bedroom, which smelled of old socks and expensive scotch and stale cigarettes. There were clothes everywhere. They sat side by side on the bed. Ben offered a glass of Chivas. Mick declined. Ben puffed on an unfiltered cigarette, inhaled deeply, and eyeballed Mick. "Okay?" He dribbled smoke, and the smoke spoke: "What's all the shouting upstairs?"

A minute later, Ben shrugged. "Okay, so we go to California. What do I care, as long as we get out of this shitty little town. Shitty city, that's what this is." He gulped some more scotch and sucked on his

cigarette.

Mick went upstairs, where Lisa sat crying on the edge of the bed, wrapped in a quilt. He put his arms around her. "Honey, listen. I love you, I truly do. I appreciate you more and more every day. Whatever it takes to make you happy, I'll do."

"You will?" she whispered, sniffing. She dabbed her eyes with a tissue and looked at him.

"We're leaving for California as soon as we get the car packed. Ben's car."

"Ben? You want to take Ben?"

"No, I want Ben to take us. Look, ever since my car died, we've been sharing that little box of yours that keeps dying. Ben has this nice big van with the new rebuilt engine in it."

She thought about it. "Well."

"What, honey. What?"

She sniffed. "Well, when we get to California, I want it to be just you and me. We'll make it on our own."

"Okay!" Mick jumped up and they high-fived. "It's settled." It was all settled now, everyone happy.

* * *

Except the cop. Jones was waiting for him the next day when Mick came out of the bank with his freshly printed check for \$2400, or rather just the stub, which he'd put into his art portfolio. He'd already cashed the check, had cash in his pocket.

Jones wore a black hat and a long coat. He leaned against the building with his hands in his pockets. His wisp of a companion waited in the parked car across the street. "Thompson!"

Mick stopped.

"Did you talk to your brother?" Jones gave up his wall and straightened up, walking toward Mick.

"Yes. He says he'll think about it."

"How long does he need to think?"

"I don't know. A few days."

"He's got until Friday. Tell him."

"I will."

Jones started to turn. "Oh, by the way. This young lady, er, your friend -- ."

"Lisa."

"That her name now?"

"Yes. Lisa Powers. What do you mean?"

"I could have sworn her name was Anita." He scratched his head. "Well, I could be wrong. Seems to me her name is Anita Towers, and she picks up a few gigs dancing late at night, you know, topless."

"You're nuts."

"Naw. I talk to the people in Vice. They've seen her around again. Hustling."

* * *

"Hurry, Mickey!" Lisa said.

"Come on, you goddamn" The rest of Ben's sentence was lost in the night.

With one last look up at the windows of Em and Monica, Mick hurried and got into the front seat. Lisa sat in the back.

"Bout time," Ben grumbled as he put the car in gear and they drove off. Lisa soon fell asleep in the back seat, wrapped in her quilt, her face resting on a pillow atop some boxes.

Halfway to California, as dawn arrived, they switched off. Mick drove, Ben dozed in the back, Lisa sat up front looking refreshed. She looked thin and youthful as she brushed her frizz. She often complained about how hard it was to have such hair. "But I love it," Mick would say. And she'd close her eyes. "Yes, I do too."

* * *

The marks in the roads. They were everywhere, black skid marks, mysteriously appearing and disappearing. They would pop out of nowhere, with no respect for lanes. They usually ran in a quarter arc and then disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. Mick had seen them all his life. He'd always wondered about them. Sometimes you even saw them running up the side of a concrete median divider.

He saw several this morning as he drove. Lisa seemed tense. Jumpy. "Micky, are we anywhere near Phoenix yet?"

He pointed under her seat. "There's a map under there. We're on the highway between Flagstaff and Phoenix and we'll be there in a couple of hours."

Ben woke up. "Hey can you pull over for a minute?"

"Sure." Mick looked in the rearview mirror. "Gotta go?"

"Yeah. Gotta go."

"Me too," Lisa said. She looked nervously at Ben.

Mick pulled over, feeling something strange and prickly in the edge of his consciousness. Ben, wearing a plaid flannel shirt and khaki work pants, walked down the shoulder of the road through a small meadow to a stand of mesquite trees. He stood there a bit. Lisa, wearing a bright shirt with yellow and orange flowers, and white pants, picked her way further in, until Mick couldn't see her anymore. Gone to squat someplace, he thought. He wondered if he had to go, too, and he didn't, at least not bad enough to make all this effort. Maybe later at a rest stop.

Lisa came out of the woods about the same time Ben turned and headed back to the car. They met in the small meadow. There, they stopped and appeared to be arguing. Then they started laughing. It was a weird, dirty kind of laugh Mick had never heard before.

They climbed back into the car. The doors slammed. "Everyone in?"

"Yes," Ben said. "In," Lisa said.

Mick started the engine, speeded up, pulled into traffic. The engine seemed for a moment to stall.

"Did you feel that?" Ben asked in the back seat.

Lisa turned white and put her hands over her face.

"What's the matter?" Mick asked, reaching over to touch her shoulder.

She kept her hands over her face and looked at him. Tears dribbled down her face, and the look in her face said she'd done something terrible that she wished she hadn't.

"Get hold of yourself," Ben said.

The car shivered. Or was it a wind, rocking them? But the greenery in the ditches along the freeway appeared calm. There it was again, a bucking sound.

"Honey," Mick said, now frightened. "What's wrong?"

Tears dribbled over Lisa's hands as she stared at Mick. Her blue eyes were filled with pain and sorrow and guilt.

"Keep driving," Ben said.

Mick lost his temper. "Shut up and let me talk to my fiancée!"

In the next second, while Lisa sobbed and the two men argued, a strong force suddenly wrenched the car. It was all over in a moment. The windows went gray, then black. Lisa screamed. Ben swore. The car began to spin, and Mick cried out the last word he would ever say to her: "Lisa!" as he held his left arm over his face and reached out to embrace her protectively with his right arm.

* * *

They were someplace cold, dark, and rainy.

Mick struggled with himself, trying to be conscious. He remembered the events of the last few seconds -- the wrenching, the sound of tires making desperate and tortured skid marks on the freeway -- then the sense of transport through the air, through black night, with an eternal wind blowing through one's very soul, a wind nothing could hide from. Then blackness.

* * *

Lisa screamed again.

Mick felt paralyzed. He was barely conscious. Could not move.

Ben was shouting obscenities and then his hoarse voice rose into a high, tortured scream.

Lisa screamed again, over and over, the desperate wail of someone lost and facing a horrendous fate. It was not a scream, more of a tormented wailing,

Rain drops, big ones, pong-ponged on the roof of the car. Mick remembered the dreary, rainy industrial parks back east where they'd lived, New Jersey, just slag dripping with rust in junkyards along rivers seething with heat and freezing rain. The kind of place one's shoulders soon hurt from so much shivering.

Lisa went on screaming like an animal in death panic.

That was when Mick first saw the shadowy figures. Men and women in overalls, their dirty hair plastered down from the rain. Some wore baseball caps, others hard hats, a few goggles. They had Ben and Lisa on their knees in the road. They had ropes on Ben and Lisa, around their waists, their wrists, their necks, their ankles. Lisa's pretty white blouse with the yellow and red flowers was already soaked and muddy. Ben's plaid shirt had turned darker. Ben had stopped yelling now. He was on all fours, head hanging exhaustedly. He'd already given up the fight. The mob of men and women threw more ropes around him. They pushed and kicked him over onto his side. Lisa was still fighting. She was still screaming. On her hands and knees, alternately begging for mercy and then yelling curses.

Mick wanted to scream for them but could not.

Ben's car seemed to have stopped at an intersection, but it was hard to tell where the muddy plains left off and paved road began. The streets here looked slick and shiny. Tall buildings, towers, laceworks of iron and lights, loomed all around. The air had a faintly metallic tinge, and it wasn't really cold, although the rain never let up and every minute or two the city seemed to grab its breath and exhale a big sob or moan of gusting wind. Above on the freeway shoulder stood what looked like a huge crane, must have weighed a hundred tons, solid Krupp dog-mean with rivets. From its pulley wheel hung a chain, and at the end of the chain was a chrome ball about twenty feet in diameter. Several operators in slickers and wet helmets climbed on the crane doing whatever it took to make the gadget work. One of the men was looking directly down at Ben's car from about fifty feet up, talking into a telephone. Police cars silently cruised in: strange looking ones, with lights in all the right places but the shapes were wrong, wedges and cubes and spheres put together like a child's Bildo set. Even the colors were off: no shields, no words, just a pearly glow somewhere on the somber end of the spectrum, maybe fiery like topaz. Or what a wax job, if that was it!

The police cars slid to a stop and the cops got out. But what cops! They wore bulbous white helmets. They had smoky visors so one could not see their eyes. They all seemed to have uniformly wiry, tallish bodies covered in some uniform that looked like black tights and a short cloak. Each carried a futuristic looking gun with built in flashlight. The men and women in overalls went back up to their jobs at the freeway shoulder.

Several kicked and clubbed Ben while they handcuffed him. "Hey, that's my brother!" Mick mouthed, but no sound came out.

Lisa kept screaming, her beautiful voice now growing hoarse as it rose up in panic and subsided in fatigue, up in terror, down in fatigue, up in horrified death fear, down again beaten and tired. Several more cops forced her face-down in the mud while others handcuffed her. She became silent. She did not look back at Mick at all as they led her to a black van. Ben was already on the van, looking slumped and defeated.

There was a rap on the window. Two or three visors floated outside.

Mick, suddenly able to move, rolled the window down. "Hey! That's my brother and my fiancée!"

A wand touched his shoulder. An electrical current tingled him and then he was still.

"Identify yourself." Tiny red lights danced behind those visors. There were a half dozen of them, multiprocessing together. One could see thoughts whirling in one visor, fly to another, and keep whirling there while other thoughts took the place of the first.

"You should not be here," one said. It sounded as if he were talking in a tin can.

Mick had a dozen questions: where am I, who are you, what's happening, how do I leave? His life flashed before him. His paintings. Lisa. Oh Lisa! Em. Monica. His paintings. Just when it was all about to turn out well. He felt a pinch on his neck, caught sight of a rubbery black glove with the corner of his eye, and lost consciousness as a steel grip touched his carotid area.

Before they lifted him from Ben's car (a tow truck was already pulling up to take it away) he caught a last glimpse of the black van carrying Lisa and Ben away toward the horizon. There, in the rain, Mick thought he made out grimy brick buildings with oddly lit windows.

* * *

Mick's strange companions kept him under tight supervision but did not hurt him. Half dazed, he was conscious of being driven through a number of drizzly checkpoints. He was removed from the car and made to walk through cool rain. They took him to a place that reminded him of a cross between a hospital and a funeral parlor, or was it a high school at night and a prison?

Inside were nurses. But they weren't nurses as Mick knew nurses, but more robotic looking shapes. They had a grip just as firm as the cops releasing Mick. The nurses, like the cops, were of indeterminate gender, shorter, squatter, dressed in white garments that resembled lab coats or jumpsuits but with articulated elbows and other joints. They smelled artificial, Mick sensed. They had smaller glass helmets -- wedge-shaped, pointy in front -- and elaborate paper cup nurses' uniform hats on top. They smelled alien, but clean, and they seemed kind in a firm, detached manner.

"This way, Mr. Thompson. You'll soon be in proper care." The tin can voice was almost feminine. Or was it a male buddy voice?

They walked a distance down a corridor with shiny floors. Looked like a hospital at night, with many doors on either sides, but the patients shuffling around, if patients they were, all wore street clothes and carried large folders under their arms.

"This way, Mr. Thompson. This is your first stop. It's the memory adjustment corridor. You can look if you wish, but it's not a requirement. Your memory will be automatically adjusted. Just walk straight on through to the other side."

So he walked. There were rooms to his left and right. He looked.

There was Ben, beating a man half to death in a bar. So the detective Jones had spoken the truth.

There was Lisa, dancing topless. How he'd hated it when she flirted with her customers at the airport. So this was the deal. Ben had forced her to make the rent money by dancing topless or he'd tell Mick about her past.

There was Ben, threatening a man with a gun, and the man cried while handing money over. So the detective -- what had his name been?

Then -- Mick swallowed hard -- there was Ben -- oh no! There was Ben, on top of Lisa, having sex with her. In Mick's bed. While Mick was at the bank pitching his paintings. Why, Lisa? Why, Ben?

"Just keep walking, Mr. Thompson. Keep on walking."

There was Ben, talking with an insurance man. And Lisa, puffing on a cigarette, nonchalant, legs cross, one hand dangling over a pretty knee while the other hand brought the cigarette to her red lips.

And then there was the freeway, the trip to Phoenix, the conversation in the meadow, and then there was

what had not happened yet. They were going to throw Mick off a building in Phoenix for the insurance money.

It hadn't been Mick's time yet. But it had been Ben's. And Lisa's. The crews with the wrecking balls on the other side were very efficient, reaching into the here and now to snatch up anyone whose number was up. They were a bit too efficient.

* * *

Mick awoke -- or was it, became conscious again? -- sitting in a pleasant room that smelled of fresh coffee. A thickly carpeted office in a high rise tower, it seemed to Mick. Picture windows overlooked an endless nightmare vista of lights and industrial shapes in the night. Clouds colored dirty gray rolled over, and every few seconds there was a flash of lightning, a tremor of thunder.

An attractive blonde in a business suit poured from a stainless steel coffee pot. "How are you doing, Mick?"

He had to lick his lips, which seemed stuck together. "Okay, I think. Am I still alive?"

"Yes, you lucky stiff. No pun intended." She smiled. "Decaf?"

Mick nodded.

"Do you remember how you got here?"

He nodded. "I think so." He tried to think, and he couldn't quite remember. "Should I be panicking? I can't remember."

"No, Mick. That's the way it's supposed to be."

"This is hell, isn't it? I wasn't supposed to go here, which is a relief. You got fire here someplace, don't you?"

She made a wry face. "We're a little more sophisticated." Her gaze roved across the tortured city scape. "You don't want to know."

"Seems an efficient operation, except that I'm here."

"Yes. We do the grab, get a jump on the processing." She sat down in a chair opposite. She folded her wrists over pretty knees that poked out from under mauve wool. Her fingernails were long and wrought in elaborate designs of gold and enamel. She saw him staring, and covered her knees, as any woman would, then realized what he was looking at. She held up a hand and laughed. "Oh, the nails. Yes, it gets boring here, not much to do. We're the Returns Section, and we don't get too many customers."

"Returns, huh? I get to go back?"

She nodded.

"I don't want to know anything about the rest of my life, please!"

She nodded again. "We are very careful. We do an E-Z Wipe. Quick and painless. You'll never remember any of this, not even in a deep dream."

He took another look at the cityscape. "Wow, look at that." Big billboards faded and reemerged in the ocean waves of fog. He could make out some of the words: JUDGMENT. MURDER. HEAVEN.

TOURS FREE. GO BY MINIBUS. THREE-DAY PACKAGE. ETERNAL OPTIONS. It all looked very industrial, very commercial. "How do you get a job here?" I asked.

She was quiet. She rubbed her hands together and looked at them and began to cry.

"Say, you do get to go home, don't you?"

She took out a hankie. "Booooh, sort of. Eventually."

Mick frowned. "What do you mean?"

She wailed: "I'm in purgatory here for a thousand years!"

"Why? What did you do?"

"I said damn a lot, and fuck, and stole pencils from the office. Had impure thoughts."

"Oh boy, I'm probably in real trouble."

A bell began to ding repeatedly. The lights flashed gently.

"It's your time to go, Mick." She rose. Quite an attractive woman. "Actually, the Returns Section is Light Duty, so it's not too bad. I get weekends off to watch t.v."

He gripped the arm rests of his chair. "What do I do?"

"Nothing, just sit tight." She went to a console and pushed a button.

"You won't remember any of this. Still, we obviously can't send you back where you came from. Luckily, we have infinitely many alternate worlds to play with. We try to match your outcome to a suitable one in the continuum, since we feel we sort of owe ya. Bye!"

* * *

Mick felt a momentary sense of disorientation.

He felt strange, fragmented, puzzled. Empty. Yet pieces seemed to be rapidly and constantly falling into place. It was not something he could have explained to anyone, but somehow he knew that would never be necessary.

He walked along Bolton. There was nothing ahead. Then the intersection with Cartwright shimmered into existence. The night was dry and odorless one moment, perhaps a little warm. Then it became cooler, a little windy, and smelling pleasantly of night-blooming jasmine. The sky above was black and empty. Then a swath of stars appeared in it. No moon to dim the stars with its glow, and that was okay. Houses, trees, hedges, a man watering, all winked into existence as this world rebooted, reloaded, reinitialized itself. He walked along feeling good about everything.

He came to No. 14 Cartwright at Bolton & Cartwright. The house was dark and still. He fumbled in his pockets, but they were empty. No, a key appeared. He looked up again, and several lights were on. He heard music -- Gymnopaedies, he recognized, by Erik Satie. The slow, measured piano notes punctuated his footsteps as he went up the stairs, one by one, each stair materializing in the dark just before he stepped on it.

He got to the top of the landing and it seemed he was in middle of nowhere. He could open and close his eyes, it did not matter -- utter blackness surrounded him on all sides. A void, a vacuum emptier than

space, for he saw no stars. Only the flickering false misfires in his brain, trying to process blackness as light. He grew dizzy and nearly fell backwards down the stairs. He closed his eyes, swayed, reached out -- and grasped the solid whorled wood of the banister.

He opened his eyes and everything suddenly seemed normal. Almost. There was one last little bit of a thing that had to right itself, and he wasn't sure what it was, but it was important. Until it fixed itself, he felt a faintly soul-sick feeling of not-rightness.

He stood still on the second floor landing. There was the carpet, a worn persian, little more than faded peach and blue and a dozen hues of brown. There was the wood floor, its fine members shiny in places, rough in others, gouged from old age. There was the table by the wall, and the big lace doily hanging down its sides, and the yellowish-glowing lamp with a brass base and a kind of siena glowing ball for a shade. The parlor smelled of flowers and lemons and oranges.

"Come in," called the familiar steady pleasant voice.

He pushed the door open. It swung slowly open, and there sat Em in the wheelchair. No, it was the beautiful face of Monica. She smiled lovingly at him with that easygoing, loving, sweet, affectionate look. The white teeth. She was beautiful.

But in the wheel chair.

He gagged, feeling the not-rightness. He clutched at his throat, gasping for air.

"What's the matter, sweetheart? Did you walk too fast?"

She stood up, and that little thing righted itself, that one last detail that made their worlds seamlessly match.

"Look, darling, I found this wheelchair in the closet. I can't figure out for the life of me where it came from." She turned, looking puzzled at the wheelchair but pleased at his return. She wore his white shirt -- too big for her -- and through it he could see the crisp little tartan-style bikini. The small breasts, the peach stomach with innie navel, the petite, perfect 16 year old body, the ribbon candy hair and the gorgeous face (he'd want to paint her again!).

"Oh Em," he said, "I had a long, long walk, and I'm so glad to be back."

The last fragment of his memories closed under the waves as Em/Monica, no, just Em, ran to embrace him. He hugged her small, tight body to himself and wondered why she had been talking about a wheelchair. There was no wheelchair and then he forgot that thought. Mick and Em shared a laugh and a kiss, as Mick with one foot pushed shut the door of their house at No. 14 Cartwright at Bolton.