

Crimson Night

and Other Short Stories

by Jaron Camp

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Crimson Night

Felix bags up the petri dish of the two blood samples and steps outside as a yellow glow lights up the edge of the woods. Oscar emerges from the shadows.

“Did you have any luck?” Felix asks.

“I went about a mile into the woods,” Oscar says as he pants. “Going East, I saw traces of blood.”

“Was it moist?”

“Yeah,” Oscar says.

“Did it lead to anything worthwhile?” Felix asks.

Oscar smiles as he tosses a cloth-like object towards Felix. Felix grabs a lantern and shines it over the material.

“This is great, Oscar. I’ll add it to the fabric and blood samples I collected inside.”

“Yeah, the trail that I picked up led to the edge of a river. That apron snagged on a log. Whoever we’re after must’ve had a boat waiting.”

Felix’s eyes widen as he clenches his jaw.

“Oscar, we need to move fast. We’ll take this to Judge Baker’s house tonight. We need a court order to stop Fayette Police from interfering with this case.”

“But Judge Baker already laughed us out of his courthouse once. What makes you think he’ll see two Negro Detectives at his house?” Oscar asks.

“Because he won’t ignore this evidence if he sees it firsthand.”

Felix and Oscar rush down Main Street towards Judge Baker’s house. Two Fayette Police Officers head them off before they can reach the front porch.

“Boy, didn’t I tell you to take your black ass back to New York?” Officer Johnson asks.

“What are you two doing here?” Felix asks while placing his hand by his waist.

Oscar circles to his left after seeing Felix move his hand towards his gun. He does the same.

Officer Johnson grins as he encourages the Detectives.

“Do it!” Officer Johnson says as he swirls the tobacco in his mouth.

Ptui.

The brownish pool hits Felix's boot.

"Give me a reason to kill one of you," Officer Johnson says.

Officer Wiley grabs Officer Johnson by his arm.

"There's no need for anything more than a simple conversation," Officer Wiley says as he pulls Johnson behind him. "We know y'all are investigating the supposed kidnapping at Willie's Chicken Hut. We were just about to inform Judge Baker on your findings."

"We haven't told anyone what we found, so how are you informing him about anything?" Oscar asks.

The front door swings open.

A large man appears with a cigar puffing from his mouth.

"You have some nerve showing up to my house this late at night," Judge Baker says.

He steps forward as he blows a cloud of smoke in Felix's direction.

"A W. Duke cigar?" Felix asks. "That's not the typical tobacco most people in Fayette like to smoke."

Oscar hands the bagged evidence to the judge.

"Sir, this is a blood soaked apron that I found at the river bank, and this bit of fabric is what Felix found at Willie's."

"And this petri dish has blood samples that suggest Willie's daughter has been kidnapped," Felix says as he pushes the bag towards the judge.

"My people tell me that Willie's daughter ran away from home," Judge Baker says as he tosses the bags back to the Detectives. "This blood is probably hers. She worked in the kitchen. I'm sure she cut herself on a damn knife or something."

"Yeah, I don't think so," Felix says as he tosses the bagged petri dish back at the judge. "You see how the blood is clumped up and separated?"

The judge cuts his eyes towards Johnson and Wiley.

"Yes," Judge Baker says.

"It's called an immunological reaction," Felix says.

"An immune what?" Officer Wiley asks.

"It's a reaction that happens when you add one type of blood to a different type of blood. The two kinds of blood don't mix because their properties are different, so one is fighting off the other," Felix says.

“So that means it’s blood from Mattie and the louse that grabbed her,” Oscar says.
“Judge, we need you to issue a court order to stop your officer’s from messing with our case.”

The satisfied expressions on the faces of Felix and Oscar are short lived. Judge Baker tosses the evidence into the air.

“I don’t give a shit if you say that’s blood from Jesus himself. If my people say the little negro bitch ran away, then she ran away.”

Judge Baker turns to go back inside his house.

“You can’t do this!” Felix says as he grabs Judge Baker’s robe. “You’re an officer of the court.”

Officer Johnson pulls Felix away from Judge Baker.

Click.

“Boy, I told you before I only need a reason,” Officer Johnson says.

“Mr. Swayne! I’m not looking for anything to happen to you, so I suggest you listen to Johnson and leave this alone,” Judge Baker says.

The door slams as Oscar and Felix pick up scattered bags of evidence, and turn away from Judge Baker’s property.

“Well that’s it, Felix.”

“It’s not over yet, Oscar.”

“How?” Oscar asks.

“We still have the lead you found in the woods, and the documentation that gives us permission to work this case.”

“Alright, Felix. Let’s get it done.”

“Go to my cousin Calvin’s house and tell him we need his boss’s fishing boat,” Felix says.

Oscar returns with Calvin who shows them where the boat is docked.

“Felix, I can get fired for doing this, or maybe even thrown in jail,” Calvin says.

“Didn’t you tell me your boss is concerned about the kidnappings?” Felix asks.

“Yeah, but I just don’t know about this,” Calvin says.

“Calvin, a young girl is in trouble. This is the best lead we’ve had since we started this case,” Oscar says. “So come on.”

They hop in the boat and shove off. The reflecting Moonlight guides them down the river

for a few miles. Felix stands on the edge of the boat gazing across the bank of the river.

“Stop. Let’s take her in over there,” Felix says.

Felix reaches out and grabs a rope connected to a tree trunk.

“I caught a glimpse of it in the light. It wouldn’t be here unless other boats used it to secure them along the edge. My guess is they stopped here,” Felix says.

They use the lanterns to search the area.

“Felix, there’s something over by that tree,” Oscar says.

A bit of smoke rises from the ground next to a pouch.

“Good eye, Oscar,” Felix says as he pulls out a pair of gloves. “W. Duke, Sons and Company tobacco pouch and a lit pipe.”

“That’s the same brand the judge was smoking. What are the odds that we happen to find the same kind of tobacco out in the woods?” Oscar asks. “Whoever left this behind must’ve been in a hurry.”

Felix dumps out the pipe and bags it along with the pouch.

“I’m guessing he stopped to take a breather and Mattie took off, causing him to drop what he was doing. Calvin, wait here with the boat. If we’re not back in a few hours, go back home and call our superiors in New York,” Felix says.

Felix and Oscar gradually make their way through the woods following a path of trampled leaves and broken twigs. Remnants of an old campsite spark the interest of Felix, and just beyond that lies an old shack.

Felix kicks a burnt log. A pile of ash turns up along with a few bones of fish.

“These ashes show that someone made a fire here quite often, and they used to fillet fish and toss the bones in the flames to burn. That log was burning as recent as this morning or afternoon,” Felix says.

“Do you think someone is inside?” Oscar asks.

“It’s possible. Just remember, Mattie might be in there too.”

The Detectives approach the shack with caution. Oscar positions himself near the hinges of the door holding his .38 special. Felix leans towards the front brandishing his .32 Colt hoping it’s just for show.

Wham, whoosh.

“Police!” Felix says as he kicks in the door.

“They aren’t here, Felix.”

Felix’s heart thumps as he slows his breathing.

“Still, inspect the area,” Felix says.

“Yeah, it smells like some strong whiskey in here. They must’ve been using it for bootlegging,” Oscar says.

“Whoever occupied this area just recently emptied it of its contents. Now we start searching for what they left behind,” Felix says.

Oscar begins looking with a magnifying glass across the shelf on the wall, being careful not to touch anything.

Felix crouches to the floor and pulls out a makeup brush and powder. Focused as ever he lightly coats an area of the wooden floor.

“Felix, that doesn’t look like the powder we usually use.”

“I’ve been testing out different powders, and found that using Johnson’s Baby Powder mixed with Cocaine creates a better fingerprint powder. A doctor I sometimes work with on isolated cases gave me some of the drug to use.”

“But why the floor?” Oscar asks.

“Because fingers aren’t the only things that leave prints,” Felix says.

He gently sways the brush across the top of the covered floor as he turns his mouth into a gentle wind.

Whoosh, whoosh.

“Hand me your Bowie Knife, Oscar.”

Felix slowly carves around the powdered wood, and places his artwork into a clear polythene bag.

Oscar smiles with amazement.

“I guess you’re correct about fingers not being the only prints.”

“That was the easy part. Now we have to take this to the local Cobbler, and find out who this belongs to,” Felix says.

They find the Cobbler in town and he identifies Nathaniel Thomas as the person who bought the size 14 boots from him. He tells the Detectives that they can find Nathaniel at the Rooster Café every morning before dawn.

Felix and Oscar make their way towards the café.

“Felix, there is a light on in the building behind the café.”

“Let’s move in. I hope it’s not too late,” Felix says.

Oscar looks through the window on the side of the building.

“Felix, I see Mattie. She’s tied up behind some barrels, but she appears to be fine. The door on your far left is cracked open.”

“I’ll see if I can get in without notice. You try to open the window and get Mattie out,” Felix says.

Felix makes his way to the door and slowly opens it.

Bang, bang, bang.

Felix dives inside and rolls behind cases of whiskey.

Bang, bang, bang.

He sees a man with a gun maneuvering towards the door.

“You done messed up now, Boy,” the man says. “You must be crazy. I’m gonna kill you and the girl.”

Felix catches a glimpse of Oscar crawling out of the window with Mattie in his arms.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” Felix says. “You messed up when you dropped your tobacco. Then you messed up again by leaving behind a shoeprint. Sir, give up now and tell me how Judge Baker is involved with this situation.”

Bang, bang. Click, click.

“Shit!” the man says.

Felix leaps to his feet and takes off towards the door.

Crack, thump.

“Nathaniel, right?” Felix asks as he stands over the man.

“Yeah, you didn’t have to hit me so hard,” Nathaniel says.

Oscar comes around the corner with Mattie.

“Is this the man who kidnapped you?” Oscar asks.

She nods her head.

“Judge Baker won’t help you. He wasn’t counting on us being smart enough to find you,” Felix says. “Your best bet is to tell us why and how you’re involved in the kidnappings.”

“I don’t want any trouble,” Nathaniel says. “I never killed any of the kids, if that’s what y’all are thinking.”

“Why kidnap them?” Oscar asks.

“Life is rough in Alabama. The white man doesn’t make the money he used to before the crops went bad. Cotton doesn’t pay well anymore.”

“That doesn’t explain anything, Nathaniel. Tell us what we need to know!” Felix says.

“The rich folks like Politicians, Lawyers, and such, they like having help around their places. They pay good money to the people that help bring the little black kids to them,” Nathaniel says.

“So this is a child trafficking operation?” Felix asks.

Oscar and Felix look at Mattie, and then back at Nathaniel.

“Felix, we have to call New York. We need to talk to the bosses and get some help with this.”

“So y’all know now. You’re gonna let me go?” Nathaniel asks.

“If you want any help from us then you better give up every name you know about,” Felix says.

“I can do more than that,” Nathaniel says.

Nathaniel leads Felix and Oscar to an old mine by the east bank of the river.

“What the hell is this?” Felix asks

“I told you I can give you more,” Nathaniel says.

Oscar and Felix walk around the gravesite of over 100 men.

“They just started taking the kids about a year ago. They’ve been taking the Negro men across the state for decades. It all started after the Civil War,” Nathaniel says.

“Holy shit,” Oscar says.

“They found a way to continue slavery. It’s like a Neo-Slavery. Oscar, go call New York.”

The Blissful Storm of Solace

The banging of the thunder and the illumination of the lightning harmonized with the gentle tapping of the rain. Jasper Razz gazed out the window as he basked in the soothing weather. Jasper opened his eyes before the chirping of the birds with every intention of playing basketball outside. However, the rainstorm ended his plans long before he received the phone call about his mother's passing. It had been a few weeks since he last visited her.

He would be expected to lean on family during a time of grieving. His girlfriend Alison would want to meet them, and she too would want to lend her emotional support. How could he make them understand that their sadness for him wasted their time, and leaving him alone is desired?

"Was that the phone? Who was calling that early?"

Alison stumbled down the stairs. Her muffled tone yearned of a person still wanting the comfort of sleep.

"Oh, that was my Aunt Terri."

"Okay?"

"She called to tell me Mom died late last night."

Jasper fumbled around the cabinet grasping for a k-cup. The only waterworks he wanted to set eyes on were outside.

"Babe, do you want some coffee? We can have it on the front porch. You know I revel in the experience of an exquisite rainstorm."

Her need to rescue him from this misery blinded her to the realization of what he asked her. Nose running and moaning in her voice preceded the drenching of Jasper's shirt. Her Niagara Falls was on full display.

"Oh my God!" Alison said. "Why didn't you wake me up right away?"

"I said she died, not dying."

Alison's doleful look became a scowl as she lifted her head from his chest.

"Why would you say that?"

"Babe, I'm sorry. It's just you know I don't get emotional about these things. There isn't anything you could've done. Besides, I want to drink a cup of coffee and enjoy the sounds of the

storm before dealing with anything else.”

“It wouldn’t be getting emotional. She’s your mother and reacting to her death is what a caring person would do.”

“The last thing I need is for another person to tell me how to feel. Especially someone who wasn’t there to experience my childhood.”

“She’s still your mother, Jasper.”

Jasper kissed her on her forehead and walked outside. He sipped his coffee and thought about his mother and the beauty of the morning.

The rain slammed against the window, and the roar of the thunder scared him. Jasper played by himself in the corner of his bedroom wishing for the rain to stop and wondering why family members had been in and out of the house all day. He was seven years old, and he routinely spent time occupying himself with his imagination. It had been three years since his father left, and although they only lived an hour away from him, Jasper rarely saw him.

“Jasper we need you downstairs,” his Aunt Terri said. “We need to talk to you.”

Jasper walked into the living room where he met his Mom, Aunt Terri, Uncle Ray, and his grandparents. His Mom sat on the couch being held by his grandma.

“Last time everyone wanted to talk it was to tell me Grandma Lainey was sick. Is your breast cancer back, Grandma Lainey?”

“No, Jasper,” Grandma Lainey said.

“The time before that it was about my cousin dying in that car crash. Before that is was when Daddy left. Is someone else leaving now?”

Receiving bad news had become standard, and he knew, this time, it was about his mother.

“Jasper, your Mom, is sick,” Uncle Ray said. “She has a disease called Multiple Sclerosis. Do you know what a disease is?”

“Yes Sir,” Jasper said. “It’s something that makes you sick. Sometimes you get fixed from it, like Grandma Lainey.” Feeling the magnitude of the moment, Jasper ran over and hugged his mother. The look in her eyes weakened his heart and swelled his eyes. “And sometimes you don’t get fixed. Sometimes you die. Are you dying, Mamma?”

“I don’t know, Sweetie.”

“I don’t wanna lose you too, Mamma!”

The bellows of his crying were as thunderous as the outside storm.

“You can cry today, but eventually you have to stop crying for me.”

The rain had let up, so Jasper walked outside to meet his friend Lance Banks, who was pulling into the driveway. Jasper and Lance had been friends since high school, and the two of them moved to the same town after college. They were more like brothers than friends, and Lance knew Jasper didn’t talk much about his home life growing up. However, that never stopped him from inserting himself into Jasper’s life and that of his family’s. After all what are best friends for if not to become part of the family?

“What’s up Jazz?” Lance said. “Why do you need to borrow my luggage? You’re 21 fam. A grown man should already own luggage.”

“What’s up Banks?”

The customary homeboy hug precedents the uneasiness Jasper felt with telling his friend that his mother had passed away.

“So why do you need the luggage? Are you going somewhere with your girl?”

The impact of this truth was sure to pluck at his heartstrings.

“Kind of,” Jasper couldn’t look him in his eyes. “Mom died last night, so Alison is going to the funeral with me. You can come too.”

“Jazz, man why didn’t you say something over the phone?” He tapped him on the chest as he got choked up. “My dude I’m sorry. Damn not Ma Dukes.”

“I didn’t know what to say. I mean, it’s alright. People die fam.”

“But that’s Ma Dukes!”

“Bruh it happened. Now we send her home, and move on.”

Lance shook his head and got the luggage out of the car.

“Why are you acting like this, Jazz? After everything you went through with her and everything she went through, you can’t just move on.”

“Banks, you act like this day wasn’t coming.”

“And you act like Ma Dukes’ Multiple Sclerosis was a burden on you. You’re making it seem like her wheelchair and hospital bed were bringing you down!”

“I’m gonna go before you cross a line that you can’t come back from.”

“Jazz, I know you’re not going to the gym.”

“I was going to ball this morning, but the courts are all wet from the storm. Open gym is going on for the next few hours, so I’m going to play while I have the chance. Maybe your ass should join me. Basketball might help you deal with that anger, my brother.”

“Your mom just passed, and you want to ball at the gym? Your priorities are whack.”

“Banks, I’ll get at you later. Thanks for the luggage fam.” Jasper put his gym bag into his car and drove off.

It was another stormy day in July. In Ohio, it rained quite often during the spring and summer months, but for Jasper it seemed to rain all of the time. Jasper, sat in silence as the rest of his stuff was placed into the moving trailer. He had been living with his grandparents on and off for the past four years, but now at the age of thirteen, the stay would be permanent.

“This is the hardest decision I’ve ever had to make,” his mom said.

“I just don’t want you going to a place like that. I’m sure my grandparents wouldn’t mind taking care of you.”

“Sweetie I know they wouldn’t mind, but I don’t want them to. They lived their lives and took care of my siblings and me. Now they’re going to share that love with you. I don’t want to be a burden on them.”

Jasper grabbed an umbrella to hold over his mother for when it was time to go. Jasper jumped as the thunder cracked across the sky.

“You’ve matured so much now. I didn’t think storms scared you anymore, Sweetie.”

“They just always come with bad news. The darker those clouds get, the harder the day is.”

“Just because it’s raining on the outside doesn’t mean the sun can’t be shining on the inside.”

“It rains too much, Mom.”

A transportation van from the nursing home pulled up to the house and lowered the wheelchair ramp.

The sky remained stormy during the funeral and after. Most of the patrons said their good wishes and made their return home. Jasper, Alison, and Lance stayed in town to visit for a few

days. Besides, Jasper's grandmother had some of his mother's things for him to go through. Jasper was glad for it all to be over. The crying and sad faces had gotten to be a little too much for him to handle. Plus, he was sick of people asking him why he wasn't crying at his mother's funeral.

Jasper and Lance went into the garage at his grandmother's house to play pool. They opened the door to let in some cool air. Luckily the rain wasn't blowing inside. Jasper opened a beer and stood just inside the opening of the garage.

"Jazz, it's your shot man."

"I need a break fam. Grab a beer and chill for a minute."

A telling calm brushed across Jasper's face.

"It was a beautiful service. The preacher did Ma Dukes proudly."

"Yeah I'm sure she would've enjoyed it. It was a nice home going."

"You know I criticized you unfairly for how you carried yourself this past week."

"Nah. You just reacted how most people would've."

"No that's not it. Jazz, I thought you were acting like you were happy that your Mom had died. You just went through your day like nothing had happened. That shit caught me off guard."

"Don't worry about it. You loved my Mom and were concerned for a friend."

"I have to ask. Did you even cry a little bit? Like did you cry when you first found out?"

"Yeah when I was seven."

"My man, I'm talking about when you got the phone call."

Jasper entered his mother's room at Fox Run Nursing Home. He still didn't like the place, but they could do a better job taking care of her than he could. With the end of his senior year approaching, he already started to miss the time he wouldn't be able to spend with his mother once he went off to college. They were a team, and her being in that nursing home hadn't changed that.

"Hey Mom, I snuck you in some Chinese food, and it's from Ming's over on Broad Avenue. Eggrolls and fried rice! Forget that pureed mush, we're feasting tonight."

Complications from her disease had made it so that she couldn't eat solid foods.

Her speech was drawn out and difficult to understand. He didn't mind, and all of the time

spent with his mother helped him understand her more than most.

“Thank you, Sweetie.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiled knowing that this devilish act pleased her just as much as it pleased him. “Take your time and I’ll make sure to give you sips of water before each bite. Just don’t tell grandma about this. She yelled at me for sneaking in that fish sandwich last month.”

About an hour later a rainstorm rolled in causing the power to go out. His mother’s eyes were frantic she was shaken by the storm. The lights came back on and her eyes relaxed.

“Kind of silly to be scared of a storm,” she said. “You don’t get scared anymore?”

“I get scared. I just don’t get scared from storms anymore.” Jasper smiled and gave his mother a sip of water. “They don’t make me cry anymore either. You taught me that a rainy day didn’t always have to be a bad day. This storm too shall pass, Mom.”

Alison joined them in the garage.

“Your grandma is sleeping. I don’t ever want to imagine what it’s like to bury a child.”

“You have to have a kid first, and that for damn sure ain’t happening anytime soon.”

“Can you stop being a smartass long enough for me to feel sorry for what you’re going through?”

“Babe, I don’t want or need any of you to feel sorry for me.”

“Alison, this is how Jazz has always been since I’ve known him. He’s not doing this to be manly or some ish. He just lacks emotional awareness.”

“Emotional what? My dude, I think the beer is taking its toll on you.”

“Here me out. You don’t cry or get sentimental or feel much of anything, when it comes to people.”

“Hey, I know he loves me.”

“I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about how he acts when he sees a damn storm. That doesn’t make any kind of sense.”

“Jasper, he has a point.”

“But I act the same way when it’s sunny outside.”

“That is true but who the Hell is always so calm during a storm? Lightning, thunder, wind, and rain make you calm. Jazz, that is some weird ish.”

Jasper smiled at Lance and took another sip of his beer. Looking into the storm he reached into his pocket and took out a folded piece of paper. Jasper's friends thought it was strange how he had a calm demeanor whenever it rained or stormed. A lot of people hate that kind of weather, but Jasper loved it. There was a pleasing splendor inside of a storm.

"Banks, I want you to read this."

"Why?"

"Because it explains a lot."

Lance snatched the paper and began to read out loud, "With the rain soon follows a storm. A storm that pains and makes us mourn. It shreds our hearts and bleeds our soul. For it knows it has control. Controls our hate, our shame, our pride. It controls us until we're weak inside. It will push us down into the ground, and storm around until we drown, but only if we let it. If we let it continue to pour over us, then it wins. Don't you think it rains too much for a lot of people? Be better! Be smarter and go out into the storm and open up a damn umbrella. Open up two if that's what it takes. You cried when you were seven, and more when you were thirteen. It's okay to cry, but don't keep crying just because you feel sorry for yourself. Don't cry because you feel sorry for me. Live the life you have. Shine a light into the storm and live for me."

"Powerful stuff isn't it?" Looking at his friend, Jasper places a hand on his shoulder. "She wrote that for me right before freshman year. I was walking around all summer feeling sad about life and acting like things would never get better. From that day forth I started embracing the storm. I knew what her result was going to be, but I owe it to her to not let that dictate my life. I came to terms with her death long before it happened. I cried, it just happened a long time ago."

"That was so beautiful," Alison said.

"Please don't start with flooding again."

"Jazz, I guess I never looked at it like that before. You've had your whole life to deal with this. You're a better person than most."

"No, I'm not. I just appreciate the time I have. My mom isn't suffering anymore, and that makes me happy. When my Aunt Terri called to tell me what happened, I immediately felt relief for my Mom."

"Jasper, why didn't you just tell us this before? I always thought maybe you and your

mom had a difficult relationship.”

“Nah. Jazz always loved Ma Dukes.”

“Babe, I guess sharing that kind of information was scary. I got used to saying goodbye to people.”

“Jazz, you didn’t just find peace in the storm; you found a way to live in it. Have to think your mom for that.”

Jasper went to the cooler and grabbed three more beers.

“Banks, she is loved and never forgotten.” Jasper held his beer in the air and nodded his head.

“To Ma Dukes.”

Playing the Game

Raef cracks his knee against the bedpost while rushing across his room. Clothes fly into the air as he finds the source of the clamor in his clothes basket. He must've dropped it in there during his drunken stagger entering his room.

“Yeah, who is it?”

“Get your ass down to the school and into my office within the hour!” Coach says. “Raef, I’m serious. Don’t piss around.”

Raef throws on his practice gear, grabs his keys, a bottle of mouthwash, and jets out of his parent’s trailer. His truck clunks out of the driveway after three tries.

The night before, Raef played one of the best games of his career, but his two fourth-quarter interceptions cost his team the state championship. His coach sounded pissed over the phone. Maybe he knew.

Raef is a senior so he can’t punish him for losing, but he can make sure Raef loses everything if he knows what he did.

The tires on his junk truck screech while leaving a cloud of smoke in the air. Raef stops in front of his best friend Jimmy’s house and pounds on the horn.

“Jimmy, get in.”

“Does this have something to do with Coach?”

“Yeah, how do you know that?”

“He called me earlier looking for you.” Jimmy makes his hand into a fan while turning up his nose. “Dude, you smell and look like last night’s vodka.”

“Stop messing around. If Coach called the both of us, then he knows something.”

“I’m not going down for this. Damn man, I didn’t even play the game. Shit!”

“Bro, I’m the one who would be going down. It’s all on me, but I have a plan.”

The truck speeds down Blanchard Avenue weaving in and out of traffic. They get to Bigelow Storage Unit in less than three minutes.

“Raef, your plan is to hide in a storage shed?”

“Don’t be an idiot.” He enters unit 21 and unlocks it. “This is where I put the money.”

“Why didn’t you put it in the damn bank?”

“How do you think it would look if an 18-year-old deposited \$30,000 into his bank account?”

“Alright, I get it.”

“The only thing I don’t get is how he would know.”

“Raef, that asshole was at the game.”

Yeah but I played an almost perfect game. I went 24/30 with 365 yards and another 85 on the ground.”

“If I didn’t already know the truth, I might be questioning those interceptions. You’re on of the most accurate quarterbacks in Ohio, and you’re known for your big stage presence.”

“No matter what, this will ensure my future.”

Raef grabs the briefcase of money and a folder with the year 2003 on it.

“Come on man. I need to get to coach’s office. I’ll play it cool, but if he does know I’ll keep you out of it.”

Coach is a smart man, but Jimmy is the only person Raef told. Mr. Jones was only at the game to make sure Raef kept up his end of the deal. They covered the spread, and Raef made sure those interceptions looked like mistakes.

They enter the school and make their way towards the Athletic Department. Jimmy stops a few feet from the door as sweat drips from his skittish expression.

“Jimmy, it’s cool. I can take it from here.” His faux grin retreats as his shaky hand proceeds to knock.

“Get in here,” Coach said.

Two men in suits sit on the couch against the wall. Their low brows and business-like demeanor give Raef a bad vibe. Their grave eyes feel as if they’re probing his soul, trying to sense his inner thoughts.

He’s not sure if his dampened forehead is due to the intensity of the moment or the residual alcohol seeping through his pores. He coughs as his mouth tries to form some coherent sentence.

“Um hey there.”

“Sit down and stop talking like an idiot. These men want to speak to you, and it will serve you best to listen.”

The two gentlemen stand to shake Raef’s hand.

“We were at the game last night, and we have a couple of questions for you.”

“Like what?” Raef shifts in his chair as his foot rapidly taps the floor.

“First, how did you feel after throwing those costly interceptions?”

Raef feels his future slipping away. His heart pounds as he tries to gather himself.

“I can explain.”

“Second, how would you like to play for Ohio State next fall?”

“What?”

“Son, anyone who has the balls to make those throws needs to be part of our program.”

“Absolutely! Um wow, I can’t believe this.”

“We will set up a trip with your Coach within the next few weeks. We have to drive to Cleveland for a meeting, but we will leave this letter of intent so you can go over it with your parents’.”

They shake hands and give Raef their card as they head out.

“That’s something isn’t it?” Coach says.

“It’s unbelievable Sir.”

“Your damn right it is.” Coach leans back in his chair as the mood darkens from his tone.

“What’s the problem.”

“Tell me what you meant when you talked about how you can explain.”

The conversation changes to what has Raef worried. He relaxes as he makes the move to play all of his cards.

“How did you find out?”

“I’ve coached you long enough to know there’s no way in Hell you could screw up that pass two times in a row. You cost me the state championship.”

“Be honest Coach. You’re more upset about not getting your cut.” Raef opens the briefcase and spins it around. “I haven’t touched the money. You can have a grand, but that’s about it.”

“How about I just take your scholarship offer away from you?”

Raef throws the dated folder on the desk and smiles.

“You’re not going to do that. Go ahead, open it.”

“Kenny Draper.”

Inside the folder is the picture of the Tennessee Titans quarterback, and receipts going

back to 2003. Coach holds up a flash drive. The vein in his forehead pulsates as his face becomes flushed.

“So Coach, do you need any more explanations?”

The Fleeting Rose

LeAnder stands there with the wind at his back, anticipating the arrival. He feels his obsession morphing into reality.

He has spent so much time researching her whereabouts. Research that has taken me on so many adventures. Only to find they were wild goose chases. However, this quest is different. This time, He knows it's worth it.

"The Fleeting Rose," LeAnder says. He stares at his watch, waiting for his crew of divers to return from the depths of the Baltic Sea with the riches that prove his loneliness has merit.

A splash hits the deck as his team emerges from the water, holding a locked trunk with a rose insignia on it. LeAnder steps forward and helps them get it on the deck.

"Twenty years I've searched, never wavering," LeAnder says. "Ever since I first heard stories of her existence and the treasure she carried, new life leaped inside of me." Grinning, he looks at the men. "The Fleeting Rose gentlemen, the mother of all pirate ships." His smile turns into a scowl. "I gave up my chance of having a family to see this play out. The fortunes I've made, just to squander all of it in pursuit of this vessel. I'll be damned if this is another dead end, another failure."

LeAnder motions to the trunk as if he's ready. One of the men grab an ax and raises it into the air. "Are you mad?" LeAnder says while snatching the handle from his grasp. "I didn't grind away to have it all ruined with the swing of an ax." He pulls a lock pick from his jacket and proceeds to work his magic. "Everything must remain intact for us to profit the most."

Slowly turning the pick back and forth he hears a click and removes the lock. As he leans in to open the trunk, a drop of sweat from the bridge of his nose splatters onto the rose insignia. Centuries of trapped air exude out. He reaches inside with trembling hands, almost afraid to know what lies in wait.

He stands in front of his team holding a watermelon sized object wrapped in a cloth. All the years of his suffering come down to this moment, bridging the gap between mania and sanity. One of the crew members taps him on the shoulder and gives him the nod. LeAnder takes a deep

breath as he sits the mysterious fortune on the deck, and starts to unravel it.

The group of men steps back as he carefully lifts his body from the ground, and glares at them. All of the anticipation, the searching, and the excitement are no longer significant. His everything is gone. Twenty years full of dreams are nightmares, the moment he realizes his treasure is the head of a marble statue.

Seething, he picks up the ax and with forceful steps walks towards his crew. “You worthless overpaid bastards,” LeAnder says. As he starts to swing the ax, a splash of water hits the deck just behind his feet. He lets the ax fall by his side as he whips around to see what is going on. Two more divers pop up from the water holding another trunk with the same emblem as the previous one.

LeAnder rushes to help them get it onto the deck. He turns back to the men whose lives he was about to end. “Pirates always tried to trick the thieves with false treasures,” he says. “This must be the real stuff.”

He picks the lock and reaches inside. Falling, he shouts to the heavens cursing everything between his past and his present. Not allowing LeAnder to grab the ax another time, the crew jump on him and tie his hands and feet. His reality is his mad obsession. His legacy is fool’s gold.

Unhinged

“We should wipe her down first, just to be on the safe side,” I said.

“I know,” Jason said.

I couldn't help but stare at her gold frame glistening in the moonlight. She looks more beautiful than when I first saw her. The silver chain with the Chinese symbol for Karma that I had christened her with was still there. This land will be a sweet spot for her. The sun will never shine directly on her; I made sure of it. She'll get plenty of shade from the trees.

Jason wiped her down like he was scrubbing concrete.

“Dude, you have to be gentle. Don't you know how to treat a lady?” I snatched the towel from him and proceeded to work my mellow groove. “You have to handle her like a sexy gazelle, not a sweaty linebacker.”

“Bro, you just used the word sexy to describe this brown piece of junk. That sounds foolish.”

I shook my head, “Brown?” I asked. “She is gold. It even says it on the manufactures label.”

“Whatever man. I just know we need to hurry up and wipe it down.”

“You're right,” I said. “That's why you need to do it my way. Slow and steady is the best way to make sure she is clean. Trust me buddy.”

“Trusting you is what got us here to begin with. You're the reason this is happening.”

“Never mind the reason Jason, this situation is already hard enough to me.” He doesn't understand the weight that this is putting on my heart. I'm saying goodbye to my baby, my princess, my friend. “We've had great times together.”

Jason stared at me.

“Who are you talking to?”

“Wait, what?” I asked.

“We've had great times together. That's what the Hell you just said, and you were looking at your car when you said it. I told you that kind of crap was strange.”

Jason doesn't get the relationship I have with my car. She is my first love, and it's always a daunting task to say goodbye to your first. However, I know that it is time to do so. I keep

massaging her body, getting her ready for what happens next. Once again Jason starts heavy-handedly chafing away at her pristine golden paint job. This night is cruel enough to her. She deserves a better ending.

I can feel my blood pressure start to rise. “Jason, just get away. I can finish this part.”

“We will get done sooner if we do this together.”

“Yeah but I will feel happier if I do this alone.” I take the towel from him for good this time. “Besides, you should make sure her new home is ready for her.”

Jason picks up a shovel and walks to the spot beyond the trees. He uses the latter to climb down and clears away some more dirt. Her new home is ten feet deep, ten feet in length, and ten feet wide. I know for sure because I measured it myself. Plenty of space for her to breathe. We already had four mattresses down there for extra comfort too.

I slide the towel across the edge of her bumper. As I take a step back, I notice her smooth finish is beautiful. “Hey Jason, get up here and take a look at my girl.” I always call her pet names. She was always too gorgeous to have some common name.

“You do have her shining.” He laughs in my direction. “As much as a 1984 Pontiac Bonneville can shine.”

His jokes are distasteful. I force a smile and try to calm my nerves. “Jason, do you remember the first time we robbed that corner store?” Now my smile is real. “You didn’t think my baby was fast enough for a getaway car.”

“Yeah, I was wrong about it that time.”

“Jason, and when we outran those cops in Ohio.”

“Yes homie, your car was useful again.”

Now he’s staring at me. He knows I get nervous when people are watching me. The light from the moon hits the Chinese symbol. It reflects off of Jason’s shovel.

He takes a deep breath and says, “I know you want to go down memory lane and relive the crazy moments we had with your car, but this is neither the time or place.”

“But this is goodbye. You know I won’t be happy without saying a proper goodbye. Why don’t you want me to have my moment?”

“Dog, the last time you had a moment with your car it ended with you running over and killing two people with it. That’s why we are burying it in the woods.”

He called her, It. That's about four times he has referred to my princess as It.

"You're right Jason. My memories of her will always remain. I'm ready to finish up and get out of here." I grab the silver karma symbol, then put the car in neutral so we can gently nudge her into her new home. The mattresses provide cushioning as well as cancelling out the noise from the impact. She looks peaceful.

Jason pats me on my shoulder and says, "I know you'll miss her, but we will find you a better car. Let's fill this grave up with dirt and make our way out of town."

My made is made up. It isn't calling her it, or the laughter, or the comment about a better car. Jason is a life-long friend, but he knows I often make decisions using the Chinese Karma symbol. I decided to do this when it reflected off of his shovel. It is a sign, and he should know that.

I raise my shovel to the back of his head. The tears start to flow as I move in.

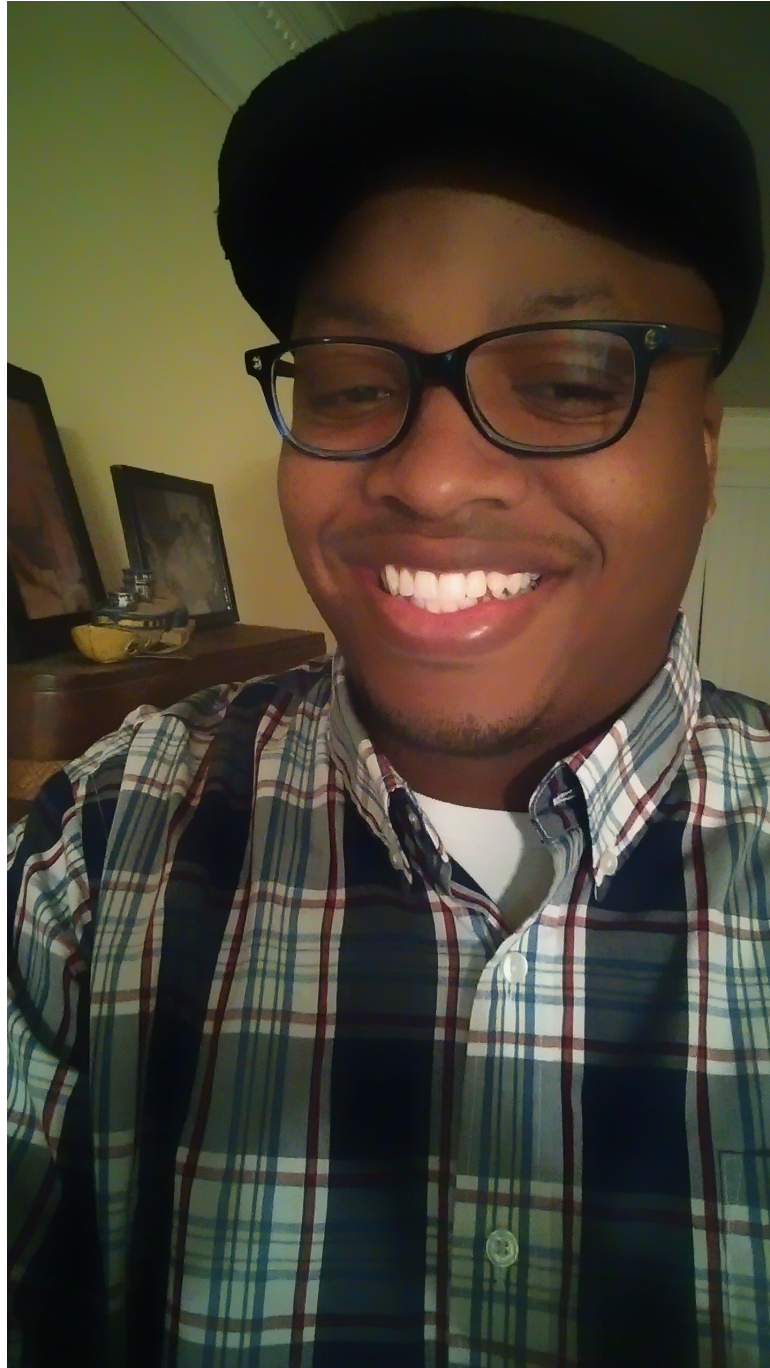
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Thank you for taking the time to read my work. I appreciate any feedback because it will only help me improve as a writer.

Thanks!

Jaron Camp

About the Author



Jaron Camp is a writer and student at Full Sail University. He is working towards his degree in Creative Writing for Entertainment. Jaron is honing his writing skills in the genres of literary fiction, genre fiction, short stories, and poetry. Jaron has a short story published by Scars

Publication. You can see it in the October 2016 issue of *Down in the Dirt Magazine*. Besides writing, Jaron enjoys working on his accent impersonations around the house. He annoys his wife with his Irish accent that sounds like Chef Ramsey and Shrek.

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