

Carl Lowell rolled over and answered his phone on the second ring, putting the display screen close to his sleep puffy face.

"Hulla?" He said. He couldn't focus on the screen for the mucous in his eyes.

"Morning, Sweetheart," his wife said. "I wanted to catch you before you went out to work. Are you still in bed?"

"No," he said, sitting up and rubbing his eyes with his free hand. "I've just been lying here waiting for my alarm to go off."

"How many times did you hit the snooze button?"

"Haven't touched it," he said, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and getting to his feet. He still held the phone low and in front of him. His wife was getting a view from below of his unbrushed teeth and scrubbly chin. He scratched his balls with his free hand and walked to the kitchen.

"We really should come down there for a week or two," she said. "I could take care of you. And you could see more of Aria."

He mounted the phone on the cupboard over the coffee maker so that she was now eye level. He rubbed his face with both hands now, trying to get the blood flowing through his skin and hopefully make it's way to his brain and wake him up.

"No, no," he said. "We've talked about this already. It would make it hard for me to work. I wouldn't be able to concentrate."

"Then take a vacation," she said. "And come down and see us."

"I will," he said. "The week before Aria's birthday. We already talked about this."

"I know," she said. He could not focus on her face and he wished everything was blurry again because he didn't like to see her upset. "Have you been looking for jobs closer to home?"

"Money is better where I am now," he said. "You know that, Babe. And this place doesn't cost me anything. And I shop just for what it is I am going to eat the next day."

"Instant noodles and whatever you can fry in that one pan of yours," she said.

"That's Mister Noodle to you, lady," he said. He got a smile out of her and that made him feel good. He reached over to the fridge and got out the coffee grounds. Keeping them in the freezer kept them fresh longer. Not that he believed it, but she would ask once she saw him take the first sip from his first mug of coffee of the day and he didn't want to lie to her about that.

"Where's my baby?" Carl asked. He peered at the edges of the screen on his phone like he was trying to look around corners.

"She just finished her bath and she is going to bed soon," she said. "You want to talk to Daddy?"

Aria's curly, platinum blonde haired head bobbed in front of the screen, not used to talking on a video phone just yet. "Daddy," she yelled. "Daddy come home soon."

"Yes, Honey," he said. "For your birthday. Will you like that? A whole week with just Daddy. No work. Just me and you. How does that sound?"

"Daddy," she yelled again. "Come home now. You come home now?"

"No, Honey," he said. "Soon. For a whole week."

"Daddy," she yelled a third time. "Now. Arie go bed now. You come home now. Daddy?"

Carl's wife took the phone away from Aria and Carl could hear his daughter just howl with rage and despair like only a two year old could. She

looked at it seriously for a moment.

"I'm going to put her to bed," she said. "She always gets like this when she is tired, you know. Want me to call after she goes down?"

Carl yawned and stretched and looked down at the coffee as it began to percolate. He looked at the time display under the pot. Eleven fifteen. Forty five minutes to midnight. He shouldn't have slept in. It would put him off his game.

"Naw," he said. "I'm already late as it is. I'm gonna throw this coffee down my throat, get in the shower, then hit the streets."

"Do you have any hot ones?" she asked.

He took his first sip of coffee. It was very hot but it tasted so damned good. "Got one for sure," he said. "A three month old Ford owned by some old lady no far from here. I might be able to trade it up for something more from one of the kids."

She pointed her finger at the screen. "You be careful bargaining with those kids," she warned. "They can be dangerous, you know."

"They don't know as much as they say they know," Carl said, taking a second, luxurious sip. "And so long as I pretend that they know more than I do, I can still manage to get ahead. Networking, Honey."

"With car thieves," she said. He thought she was going to spit at the video screen. "For all the car companies have done for us. Ford has changed our lives. Those little bastards..."

"... let me retire early and you live pretty good in the country," Carl finished for her.

"Without her husband," she added.

"It's temporary," he completed, and took a long, third swig of his hot coffee. "Baby, listen, I hate to say this, but I gotta go, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah," she said. "Will you call on your way home?"

"Depends on how early it is. I could be in for around seven or eight in the morning or so."

"Call," she said. "Maybe we can have a little fun over the phone before you bed down."

He raised his eyebrows and finished the last of his coffee. "That, my darling wife, is a date. I'll even shave and get all pretty for you."

She winked. "I love you."

He pursed his lips in an air kiss. "Love you too," he said and pressed the end button.

He stood there at the counter, head bowed, thinking about the coffee pot and if he should have a second cup. It really didn't taste all that good, he admitted, once the flavour settled in the back of his mouth. He had never cleaned the machine and it was probably all gummed up. He could go down to the store and maybe pickup some cleaner and flush it out a couple of dozen times. He could do that and tomorrow he would have a cup of coffee that he would not have to fool himself into thinking that it was good stuff. He sighed and poured a second cup without looking, guessing how full the mug was from the sound of the coffee pouring in. Just as he was about to stop, slender, almost porcelain skinned arms wrapped around his waist.

"How in the name of Mary Fuck do you do that every goddamned morning," the voice behind him said. "I mean, seriously. Sugar fucking shock. Is that coffee fresh. I'd blow a horse for a decent cup of coffee."

The red headed nymphet came out from behind him, her long hair tied back in a ponytail, the top of her head barely coming to his shoulders, and grabbed at his mug. He considered holding it up over his head but he lowered

it down for her to take. He backed up and away from him to get a look.

She held the mug with both hands and brought it to her full lips and took a deep swallow. She put the mug down, holding it against the middle of her chest, in between her apple sized breasts. They were topped with tiny nipples that seemed a sinister colour of red. Her green eyes caught him admiring her and those sensuous lips curved into a smile.

"You wanna be late for work I take it," she said, looking to the bulge in his crotch. A small dark drop grew at the front.

"I can't be late," he said. "You know that. I got to get to that car before your friends do."

She put down the coffee on the counter behind her without taking her eyes from Carl. "Don't worry," she said. "I won't take long."

Thirty minutes later, a freshly showered Carl, wearing yesterday's unwashed clothes and no underwear, had walked along Bloor street, crossed the viaduct and crossed back across Bloor at Broadview to get over to Cambridge Avenue. He checked his phone, folded down to just a display and strapped to the inside of his wrist. Fifteen minutes to spare, he confirmed, and lit a smoke. The kids from Macushla's gang would not be able to do anything until midnight plus one second, when the ownership of the car went from being the old woman's and went back to being the property of the Ford Motor Company. He pinched the filter of his smoke between his teeth and reached past the folds of his overcoat, sport coat and hooded sweatshirt for the firearm in his shoulder holster. The big bad gun's grip was in his pit and the tip of the sight dug into his kidney if he bent the wrong way. He had a smaller piece, one that was actually more effective in a firefight, strapped to the inside of his leg. But he had gauged the reaction of he had got from Cush when she first saw it.

"What a fucking cannon," she had said.

Her eyes were genuinely wide with disbelief. Carl had liked the drama the size of it had created. He stood there, smoking his cigarette, waiting for the first minutes of the next winter's day, a day that was proving to be as cold as any had been leading up to it, remembering how it felt to see Cush as she went over it with her eyes, how it felt to keep it from her, saying that it was too dangerous for her to even touch it. A hair fucking trigger, he had told her. If I fart, I'll set it off. Truth was, the trigger had an eight pound test. For all of the fingers it would take for her to exert that pressure, she'd never get them all inside of the guard.

He told himself he had done it because he wanted her to go back to all of her friends, like he knew that she would, going on about how she had fucked the shit out of him, robbed him blind, and told him nothing but crap about what it was they were up to, but she wanted them all to see the gun how she saw it. So that when they saw him, they would see the gun and they would hesitate long enough for his old bones to get a leg up on their young blood and maybe make it through another day. He held the wooden grip of his weapon and told himself that.

Carl walked along the sidestreet like that, one hand on the inside of his jackets, holding the grip of his weapon, his head down against the winter rain and looking to the display of his phone, waiting for it to tell him when he got to the right house. When it did, he looked up and to his right, then turned his whole body to face that direction. The rain fell diagonally because of the blowing wind, so when he put his head up, the brim of his hat on the rain side of his face didn't provide much direction. For all of the

stinging sleet that pelted him, hard enough to mark his face with pin pricks of bright red, he didn't acknowledge it. He could not see the front of the townhouse, or even the Ford Alligator he had come to repossess, because of the enormous, three headed stone dragon fountain that was sprawled across the front lawn.

The fountain had been dragged from the street, over the curb and onto the middle of the yard. Carl looked at the curb and where it wasn't cracked, it was missing completely. Carl stepped over the curb and into the furrow created by the base of the fountain when it finally made it up and over. It went up to the middle of his calf. He stood there in the rut and looked at the fountain for a minute. He couldn't help but do anything else. It was all the eye could see until you got past it.

The street lights on either side created a terminator of darkness right up the middle of the monster and casted deep, dark shadows along the ribs and folds of it's wings. The bottom edges of these wings touched the fences of the townhouses on the other side, the top edges of the wings, each tipped with a single claw that had dulled over time. Each of the heads of the monster had pits carved as pupils, like the statues you would see at a museum, and the night's shadows made those pits cavernous. The dragon's heads leaned over the dirty, algae stricken basin, it's talons, each one of them as thick around as Carl's wrist, clinging to the edge for support. One arm of the dragon supported it on the other opposite side. The other reached out, as if the beast had been frozen in time while trying to attack it's prey. Carl thought of women who turned men to stone after looking them in the eye and Carl wondered if this old dragon had met this fate and then became just a fearsome lawn jockey for some collector's lawn.

Carl ducked under the the left wing of the dragon, holding out with one hand to steady himself not to stand up too soon and wack himself a good one on the head. He got to his feet and looked at the house and the rest of the yard and wondered where the truck could be.

Behind the dragon fountain were two more statues. Carl looked to the ground in front of them and saw a deep trench leading up to each one. Each of those had been dragged, too. Little demons, upper bodies sculpted to look cherubic, like they still had a few more years of baby fat to shed, with high, protruding foreheads with tiny, delicate horns popping out, the skin around the horns curled like the edges of a blister pack when you pop out a tablet of gum. One played a little harp, the other a flute, and the their lips curled only on one side of their face, and one demon was the opposite of the other. If you combined them both, it made a single, evil smile. From the waist down they were rams, with thick, solid furry haunches and cloven hooves for feet. Each demon had it's own pedastel they were placed on, so while they were only three or so feet high, they met with Carl at eye level. And the shadow cast by the dragon made their eyes blacker than pitch. The fountain had been dragged from the street, over the curb and onto the middle of the yard. Carl looked at the curb and where it wasn't cracked, it was missing completely. Carl stepped over the curb and into the furrow created by the base of the fountain when it finally made it up and over. It went up to the middle of his calf. He stood there in the rut and looked at the fountain for a minute. He couldn't help but do anything else. It was all the eye could see until you got past it

The townhouse was the seventh one out of nine in the long unit. Tall fences on either side separated it from it's neighbours. Fences that were eight feet tall. To see what was even going on in the yard of the house with

the dragon's fountain you would have to walk to the end of the yard and look around fence, get a nine foot tall stepladder, or go into your own house and look out the window from the second floor. But without any ladder and without taking a peek from upstairs or downstairs, a person in the townhouse at the other end, the number one townhouse, would only have to turn their heads. The wings of the dragon was a high as the roofs of all of the houses.

Three steps lead to a set of double doors. First, a flimsy screen door, with the glass slid down to keep out the cold, and second, what looked like a much stronger door. The true door, you could call it. To the right of the double doors was a large white paned window, set overtop double paned sliding windows. The sun faded curtains, once they must have been a deep, royal red, overlapped and prevented anyone from getting the slightest peek inside.

Beneath the window was a set of stairs that looked like a someone had pulled away the wooden framing before the concrete had set properly. At the bottom of these stairs was a single, bare, dark incandescent bulb. The pull string hung wantingly, to see if tugging it would bring the old style bulb to life. Carl stepped to the edge and looked over but did not venture down.

The small garage, to the left of the stairs, could only fit the bed of the line-green Ford Alligator that Carl had come to collect. The rear window of the car fit snug against the top part of the garage. Carl imagined that if he got up on top of the roof of the cab he could get inside the window on the second floor. The window on the second floor was a mirror of the one on the first floor, but next to the second floor window was a smaller, narrow window with the same kind of sliding window at the bottom. But Carl had come for the Alligator and nothing else. He checked the time on his phone and saw that Ford now had a legal right to the Ford Alligator. The owner had failed to make their payment by 12:01AM on Saturday, April 1st, so that meant that Ford was allowed to take back ownership and rent that vehicle to anyone else in the world that wanted that make, model and options. What Carl made his living on, though, was getting there before someone else did. Because until Ford got their hands back on their vehicle, it was fair game to anyone else who wanted to claim it and rent it to someone else. Which was practically a license to print money. Which is one more reason for him to need Macushla.

Carl flipped open his phone and held it by the base, pointing the now flipped up face of the phone towards the Ford Alligator, as if the phone were a camera and he was going to use it to take a picture. He dialled a few numbers with his thumb and the headlights of the Alligator came on and the turn signals flashed. He walked around to the front of the Alligator, still holding out his phone, and stood in front of the gaping chrome grill, still tapping numbers on his phone with his thumb. The turn signals continued to flash in a non-random pattern. The phone was able to decipher the language of the Alligator's electronic control unit, but Carl had recovered so many of these big bastards for Ford, that he could decipher the signals on site. Something was physically preventing the door locks from opening. He stood on his toes to look over the expanse of the hood and into the great horizon of a windshield and could see nothing. He sent a command to the vehicle. Remove tint.

The enormous bright orange beak of the children's stuffed bird pressed again the inside of the windshield made Carl take three steps back in shock. It's googily eyes pointed in opposite directions and it's fake feathered wings were splayed because of the of the rest of stuff that had been forced up against it. It was as if the stuffed bird had once been real and had been killed by being squashed by the mass of stuff up against. He could see tired,

water stained boxes of all shapes and sizes, tied up with all kinds of different string, all different colours that had all been faded over time.

He walked over to the passenger side window. After consulting the cost table of the Alligator, the cheapest window to replace was the passenger side window. And whatever damages he put to the vehicle to return it were charged back to him, albeit at a factory rate and not a shop rate. He stood, his back to the street, his left hand holding open his phone, his right hand drawing his gun beyond the folds of all of his jackets, while looking over his left shoulder should anyone be coming out the of the house to stop him. With the fountain and the tall fences, there would be no one sneaking up on him from anywhere else.

Before pulling the trigger he consulted the data from his phone one more time. The window was shatterproof. He nodded, but still kept his head over his left shoulder and away from the blast. He closed his eyes and pulled.

The round exploded through the window and then tore a furrow through the stuffed animals, electronics, appliances, books, magazines, manuals, pushed aside the small tools and utensils, the toys, the pens and pencils and came to a stop, losing all of it's energy before it could make it through to the other side. The window now weakened, Carl hit it with the butt of his gun, and cleared away all of the glass. Once the glass was cleared, he holstered his weapon and climbed up on the running board. The narrow running board was enough for him to stand on but not enough for him to get any kind of balance. After considering it for a moment, he strapped his phone back to his left wrist and held on to the door handle. He reached into the window and down, looking for the lever to tug on the door.

"Got it," he said out loud, and yanked up.

The door to the Alligator opened cock eyed and he hadn't thought about checking that out. All doors open normal, he thought, except for the Alligator. It was hinged to the outside, not the inside, so when the door, against all that pressure of all of that stuff on the side, was relieved it flun open and slammed Carl.

The Alligator was parked tight against the garage of the house. So when the door slammed against him, it slammed his back into the stone wall of the house. Time drew out, allowing him to feel every crevice and crack of the old brick when it bashed into the back of his head, then the steel of the door when his head bounced forward, closing the door of the Alligator and letting Carl fall to the wet pavement. His hat fell forward onto his face and all he could see was nothing and smell the wet dog odour of the inside of his old hat.

"You told me you unloaded it," a voice said. It sounded to Carl like a kid. "You told me when he went in the shower, you unloaded it."

"I never told you no such thing," another voice said. "Now climb in this motherfucker and get it started."

That voice he knew.

"Machushla?" Carl said.

"Keep your fuckin hands where I can fuckin see them, old man," she said. "I told the kid that I unloaded your gun so he wouldn't be so fuckin scared and I didn't think you'd have the fuckin guts to pull it."

"Can I take my hat off my face, at least?" Carl asked.

"Yeah," she said. "But if you move one fuckin finger anywhere near that goddamned cannon of yours, the only thing any other chick will be suckin is to suck start your catheter. Fuckin dig?"

Carl nodded and slowly brought his hat back on his head. A little further back, so he could see everything.

There was Cush, standing over him holding a gun of her own. She held it with two hands and pointed it not at Carl's face but at his crotch. Carl took care to show her his hands and did not move. He looked without moving his head to the cab of the Alligator. More stuff vomited from it's innards, but it was being thrown by the unknown kid who rummaged around inside the cab, trying to find the ignition control and relays so he could bypass the locks and get the thing started.

"This could be a whole lot easier if you just gave me the codes, Carl," Macushla said. "And you could save your balls."

"You know I can't do that, Cush," Carl said. "They'll know who unlocked the ingition to get it started."

The slick rain dripped from his eyelashes and onto his cheeks but he could clearly see her. She wore a transparent raincoat trimmed in pink and white, like all of the edges had been wrapped in a girlie candy cane. Through her coat he could see she wore a knee length, grey woolen kilt, white trimmed knee high stockings and black low heeled shoes, complete with sensible galoshes. To keep her warm, she wore a faded red cardigan over a white blouse with a high collar. He wanted to laugh.

"I love your galoshes," he said.

"Fuck you," she said, and pulled a trigger, missing his cock but sending enough concrete shrapnel into his thighs and crotch to make up for it.

"I should have known better than to deal with you," he said. "I should have had my head examined."

"You should have known better than to go for a fucking shower and leave your phone where your girlfriend could see it," she answered.

"You are the furthest thing from a girlfriend," Carl said. "Don't go giving yourself that much credit."

"A lesson I learned a long time ago," she said. She leaned a little forward, her head poking out from under the protection of the hood of her raincoat. "Don't shit where you eat."

Carl started to get up. She cocked the hammer with both thumbs.

"You can get out of this pretty clean, old man," she said. "Just stay where you are. Cutty! You done in there?"

Cutty rummaged around and threw more garbage out the window, more out of frustration than anything being in his way. "I need some more time, Cush. This is pretty state of the art, all of three months off the assembly line."

Carl couldn't see the boy from where he was on the ground. The partly opened passenger door of the Alligator got in the way.

"What colour is your hair?" Carl called out. "I bet you it's blonde."

Cush locked her fingers around the grip of his pistol and swung her arms like she was driving a nail into Carl's cheek. The sun went nova before his eyes and he heard a crack of thunder. He fell to his side, his other cheek now coated with a thin gruel of mud. He pushed himself up with one hand and then the other, getting his knees beneath him for balance. Cush was in his ear in an instant.

"Never shit where you eat, Carl," Cush said. "You know why? You listed your home number just like that. Home. I just went to it and clicked Send. You know what I sent."

"You cunt," Carl said. It hurt to move his lower jaw. He touched it with his right hand, lost balance on the went earth, and fell the to ground. Cush was on his back now, whispering in his ear. He was soaking wet now.

Right to the bone.

"No," she said. "I couldn't send her pics of that, much as she'd love one peach of a pussy like mine. No, couldn't send her anything of me. But I could send her all of the others. All of them."

Cush pushed the barrel of her gun into the back of his neck and grabbed the hair at the back of his head and jammed it forward, suffocating him in the muck. His head was gone now and Carl didn't care if he ever got it back, much to his amazement that he could even consider it right now.

"And it looked like an accident," Cush said. "Like you meant to send it to someone else. More convincing that way, don't you think?"

The mud tasted like death. He struggled to turn his head to one side and he spat and spat, pushing it out of his mouth with his tongue.

"She knows you now," Cush said into his ear. "She knows what you want. She knows how to feed you now and fill you up. I wonder if she'll even let you see pictures of your daughter's graduation."

"Say," she said. "Now that's something."

She tugged back on his hair and withdrew the barrel of the gun and turned him over. She straddled his chest and put the gun to his Adam's apple. She grabbed his hair again, pulling his face to hers, digging the gun into his throat, choking him again. But he could not cough a breath of air.

"Just who were you thinking of when you were fucking me, old man?" she asked. And with that, she let go of him roughly tossing his head backwards. He coughed and spat and tried to get a breath. He had to roll over on his side and into a ball to do it.

"Cutty!" She yelled. "What. The fuck. Are you doing?"