

An Attack of Suffocation

Brian Ross

“Maybe I *am* a son of a bitch,” I whisper, as gray-blue smoke streams from my dry lips.

Julia is frowning at me because the cigarette I’m smoking was her last. I didn’t ask for permission. Her body is curled up in a knot against the headboard and her crimson fingernails are digging into the blue bedspread. She pulls a throw pillow over her face and snarls something indecipherable.

I take another drag of the cigarette and I kill the lights. I don’t know where my watch is, I haven’t seen it in two days, and there are no clocks in her place. Julia doesn’t believe in keeping time.

I stab out the spent cigarette into the tiny pool of brown liquid at the bottom of a white coffee mug that sits on the antique dresser. Julia has pulled the pillow away and her wavy brown hair is spilling across her angular face. The first time she brought me back here, to this barren little rental home in the middle of North Jersey, a hot day in what was probably August, I asked her about the absence of clocks.

“Time has little or no value for me,” she said that morning.

“Which is it?”

“What?”

“Little or no value? Which is it?”

She looked away from me, out the window, at the motionless elm leaves held captive by the muggy air. “When I decide, I’ll let you know,” she said.

Now she pushes back her hair with delicate fingers and wraps a white sheet around her head like a cowl. The slightest trace of a smile appears and vanishes quickly. “Veer in some trouble, no?” she asks, using another one of her mocking accents, and I gravely nod. “The police will be searching for someone vitting your description. What vill you do?”

I shrug and sit on the corner of the bed. My shirt is open and my bare chest is exposed. I run my fingers across the soft, cool bedspread,

and I can feel Julia's small feet buried beneath the fabric. "I don't know," I say. "Either they'll get me or they won't."

A guttural laugh from the black depths of her chest. "Brilliant," Julia says, softly kicking at my abdomen through the bedspread. "*La police, ne t'a pas encore trouvé?*"

It's always something with Julia. This week, it's everything French. I rub my hand across the stubble on my chin and examine her face. "What will you do, sweetheart?"

She sighs and her eyes move toward the window, where the curtains sway softly in the breeze. "Europe, possibly. I've been thinking about moving to Europe for some time now."

"Anywhere in particular? Europe's a big place, baby. I went to London once. I bumped into Albert Finney in the middle of the street. Right smack into Albert Finney, and you know what he said?"

She looks down at the box of smokes. It's still empty. "You finished my cigarettes and I think you *are* a son of a bitch."

I shrug.

"Just Europe," she says. "I've always liked the ring of it. Europe."

"Maybe you just don't want to tell me where you're going."

"Maybe."

I stand up from the bed and move to the window. Outside, people are doing the things that mark them as productive members of society, things like mowing lawns and walking dogs. One shirtless guy is tilling a small garden. His hairy back is slicked with sweat. The breeze is delicate on my dry lips. "I could find you anywhere," I say.

Julia is facing the other direction, smiling in profile, never more beautiful than when she's not looking directly at me. "Sticks and stones."

My hands are on Julia's small shoulders, gently drawing her back and then releasing her. Her slender fingers encircle the chains that support this playground swing. "Police cars and movie houses," Julia says, ending what seemed an interminable silence.

“Hmmm?”

I cannot see her face, only her hair as it flutters behind the pendulum of her body, but I imagine she is smiling right now. “That’s where I spent most of my childhood, it seems. It’s funny, I guess. Whenever I was in that cool, dark theater, I rooted for the cops. But when I was in the back seat of their car, well, that was a different story.”

I wrap my hands around her hands, which still cling to the chains, and the rhythmic sway of the swing slows to a halt. “How about now?” I ask. “Ever root for the cops now?”

“Don’t be foolish.”

There is no one else on the playground and the sky is ruddy above the gray-brown brick wall of the school. This place, the kind built as part of the W.P.A., looks very old now, but somehow still dignified. “You never just played in places like this?”

“Nah. Not until my friends and I were older, and that wasn’t really playing.”

“You never—what do people do here?” I inhale and the smell of the grass on the nearby field fills my lungs. Children played and sang and ran and spat and bullied and learned to fight here. “What,” I say, “what do people do in places like this one? I don’t know, frolic? You never frolicked?”

“I definitely missed all the frolicking. We did come here from time to time in high school, though. We needed a secluded place to smoke cigarettes and drink the whiskey we stole from our parents.” She laughs, and I try to imagine the private memory she has unearthed.

“So neither of us spent much time on playgrounds,” I say, in what amounts to a half-whisper.

“I’m glad,” Julia says with a distant sigh. “All this grass would’ve made me sad.”

Nico has ketchup at both corners of his mouth. It’s a bright crisp Sunday in April, bright enough that I have to wear sunglasses,

and the lot is empty save for Nico's Cadillac and my stolen Plymouth, which is parked about thirty yards away. Inside, Julia is reading a dog-eared French paperback and smoking cigarettes. I don't like it when she smokes in the car. She doesn't ask for permission, either.

The wind kicks up and I feel the collar of my brown corduroy blazer ripple as I study the ketchup at the corners of Nico's mouth. Nico looks at me, then at Julia in the car, then back at me. "That little number in the car, she's with you?"

"Yeah."

"You two serious?"

"Not sure I know what that means, Nico."

Nico rolls his dark eyes as I turn my back on the wind to light another cigarette. My collar flares again. "You love her?"

"Is that so important?"

"Jesus." Nico shakes his head. "Some things change," he says. "Some things don't."

I smile and look back at the statue of Julia in the car. She's wearing black sunglasses and hasn't moved since I stepped out of the Plymouth.

Rubbing the sleeve of his windbreaker across his face and looking down, Nico sees the ketchup on the fabric. "Were you going to tell me about that?"

I grin and suck my cigarette to the filter. "What do you need me to do, Nico?"

"Simple," he says. "One day's work. There's a house with a couple of guys inside. These two guys, they don't matter. You understand me? What matters is that these guys took something valuable from some other people who do matter. A suitcase. I need you to bring that suitcase to me."

"What about the guys?"

"You know what happens to people who don't matter."

"How messy do you want it?"

"I hire you because you're not afraid to make things extra

messy.” He hands me a scrap of paper with an address. “Do this for me and all debts are forgiven. Plus two thousand on top.”

“Forgiven plus two?”

“You heard right.”

After we leave Nico standing in the lot with the ketchup now on his jacket, I tell Julia I’d like to buy her lunch. She shrugs disinterestedly and impatiently searches the car radio for a good song.

“Are we in love, Julia?”

“I don’t know. How would we know if we are?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think. You?”

“I think we’re in love but I don’t think we like each other very much.”

I roll down the window and watch the houses fly by us in a torrent of front doors, red and white and brilliant yellow.

“You know why I wear sunglasses?” I ask.

“So other people can’t see your eyes.”

I take off the glasses and glance over at Julia. “How did you know that?”

She smiles and leans back in the seat, satisfied at last with the tune she has found. “Same reason everybody else wears them.”

After lunch, we sleep together in her rented bungalow and when we finish she stands up and pulls a weathered gray sweatshirt over her smooth white body. “That salad was delicious,” she says. She’s walking around the bedroom and examining her own belongings with what looks like a sense of detachment, as though she is the visitor in this place.

I lean back against the headboard and exhale deeply. The bright afternoon sun is held at bay by the curtains. It is beginning to get warm in here and I’d like to open the window, but it’s too great a distance

from the bed. I am too weak. "That's all you have to say?"

She puts on my sunglasses and twirls, her brown hair trailing just a split second behind her lopsided smile. "I never make love on an empty stomach," she says.

We sit on a bench staring out at the Hudson River. On the other side, the skyscrapers stand like sentinels with nothing to guard. People swirl around us, talking on phones, taking photographs of the skyline, discussing plans. A light rain begins to fall, not enough to force us to seek cover, but just so that I can savor the drops on my face and hands.

"Did you ever think about going clean?" she asks. She motions toward the buildings on the far side of the river. "You know, joining society, maybe even taking a job over there?"

I laugh. "Of course not."

She smiles. "It pleases me to hear that. I wouldn't want you to." She sighs. "I've seen what it does to people."

I touch her hand, mixing the drops of rain on my fingertips with those on hers. "But what about us? Are we really any different?"

"Of course we are."

"How do you know?"

She takes a deep breath and looks back at the buildings. I watch her beautiful profile, the slow creep of the smile across her porcelain face. "When you used to go to the movies as a kid, did you think the characters on the screen were real? Did you think they were alive?"

I laugh again. "No. Of course I didn't."

"But how did you know?"

"It's not the same thing, Julia. Not the same thing at all."

"Yes, it is." The smile disappears from her face for just an instant, then, in a burst, it returns. "Come on, you can buy me an ice cream cone."

I wrap my arm around her shoulder. "Why would I want to do a thing like that?"

“So you can ask for a bite and I can slam it into your nose, just like in the movies.”

The last time I smoked a joint was over two years ago and I am not about to begin again tonight, but that does not stop Julia. She sits on the couch, legs crossed, with an ashtray on her lap. I’m on the floor with my back propped up against the couch, the back of my head just touching her bare right foot, and the smoke, bitter and silvery in the dim light of the room, is beginning to bother my eyes and my lungs.

“I’m going to open a window,” I say, although I do not move.

“No.” A great exhale. “*Il fait trop froid* and I don’t want the neighbors smelling this.”

“Baby, I can barely breathe in here.”

She shrugs and takes another drag.

Shafts of street light are falling through the thin slits between the blinds, illuminating Julia’s face in a series of sharp angles.

“Baby, just how old are you, anyway?”

“Does it matter?”

I turn back to the dark, silent television screen. “Probably not.”

“So, why ask?” She takes another drag and carefully ashes into the tray. “Either I’m younger and you get off on that, or I’m older and you get off on that. And what if we’re exactly the same age, what then?”

“Nobody is exactly the same age.”

She laughs. “I suppose not. And there’s no fantasy in that case, is there?”

“This isn’t about a fantasy.”

“Sure it is. It’s a fantasy about two people who are exactly the same age.”

“But we’re not the same age.”

“We can be. We are now.”

“But I know we’re not,” I say.

“That doesn’t matter, now does it?”

We sit in silence for a long time while Julia slowly works on the joint. When I look back up at her, I half expect that the light on her face will have shifted, but it’s artificial, it’s from a street lamp, and her face is there, still lit in the same sharp angles.

“What words do you like?” she finally asks.

I shrug.

“Words, words, words,” Julia says. “I think I really like the word *feign*.”

“Feign? Why?”

She finishes the joint and rubs it out in the ashtray. She cups the tray in both hands and stares at it for a moment. “Well, it’s supposed to be a synonym for fake, but it’s really not. When you fake a smile, there’s something selfish involved. When you feign one, it’s, I don’t know, it’s not for your benefit, it’s somehow, I don’t know, somehow altruistic. When you feign, you’re definitely doing it for the sake of others.”

She hands me the ashtray and I place it on the coffee table.

“Julia, are you doing something for my benefit? Is that what you’re trying to tell me?”

“Let’s go to sleep,” she whispers.

Shortly before dawn, Julia’s wispy breath on my chest rouses me. Her eyes are wide, and I sense that she has been watching me sleep for quite some time. “We never really say anything, do we?” she asks. “About ourselves. We never really tell each other anything.”

I caress her soft cheek with my right thumb. It glides down to her upper lip, then down across her mouth, resting on her chin. “I thought that’s what you liked about this.”

She closes her eyes. “No,” she says. “That’s not it. That’s not it at all.” She opens her eyes, and for just a moment, possibly in the shifting light of the dawn, they seem as though they’ve changed shade. “You’ve never told me anything about where you’re from or

any part of your life before now. You've never once talked about your parents."

I press my lips to her cool forehead, then softly to the bridge of her nose. "What's there to say? I'm not one to blame everything on my upbringing."

She grins. "Nor am I. I blame a continuing erosion of society's value system. Entropy's a real motherfucker."

"Are you never serious?"

"Why should I be?"

"It would certainly be a change."

Julia sighs and rests the back of her left hand on her forehead. "What's the point? One day, I'll be dead. We both will. That's the time to be serious. Until then, I plan on trafficking in flippancy."

"Good luck."

Her lips find mine, then move up my cheek toward the base of my left ear. Her breath is cool on my sensitive skin. "Tell me about them."

"There isn't much," I whisper, before allowing my voice to gain a bit of strength. "My father, he killed himself when I was eight. Shortly thereafter, my mother started going crazy by degrees." Julia's eyes grow large and her mouth quivers a bit. I touch my right index finger to her lips. "She remarried and went west. I haven't heard from her in over a decade," I say.

Her soft kiss on my left shoulder. "How did he do it?"

"Who?"

"Don't stall."

I turn my face away and look at the white wall above us. "Shot-gun blast to the face," I whisper. "Charming, isn't it?"

"My god." Her left hand cups across my right cheek and gently turns my face back to hers. "My god. Why?"

"The why, the why, the why." I close my eyes and allow her to gently stroke my throat and upper chest. Her touch is rhythmic. I let it go on for what feels like a long time. "That I never did quite figure

out. I was only eight at the time. He didn't leave a note and I was too young to notice any real unhappiness."

"That's awful. I'm so sorry."

I open my eyes and look at hers. "It's funny that the detail I remember most, the one that stays with me, more than his hair color or aftershave smell or the sound of his voice, is that he did it on a Saturday morning. He just woke up one Saturday morning and drove to his office—he was a lawyer—and he just killed himself. Nobody ever knew why. Nobody even talked about it much afterwards. I never knew if it was a snap decision, or if it had been something he'd planned on for a long time."

Julia kisses my cheek and drapes her left arm across my chest.

"Sometimes," I say, "sometimes I like to think that he didn't plan it at all. I like to think that he just went to work one day, sat down at his cluttered desk and realized that it was Saturday, that he wasn't supposed to be there on a Saturday, that he never worked a Saturday in his life, that something in his life had unraveled to the point that he didn't even know what day it was anymore, and the gravity of that was just too much for him. Knowing that, realizing that, he had no choice. He had to do it."

Julia's arm tightens around my chest, and I touch her right shoulder.

"I'd like to believe that," I say, "but that theory, while comforting, doesn't explain why the hell he kept a shotgun at his law office."

She nuzzles into my face, and she is weeping very softly. "You're going to kill those men tomorrow, aren't you?"

"It's already tomorrow, baby. And if I can avoid that, I will," I say. "But it is a possibility. Does that frighten you?"

She lifts her head and wipes her eyes. She props up her chin with her right palm. "No," she says softly. "It's not a crime to kill those men if they're already dead."

"I don't understand," I say, looking into her eyes. I think now that they have changed shade.

"Yes, you do," Julia whispers. "You just don't know it yet."

The Plymouth is parked a block away from the house with

orange aluminum siding. My cold palms are on the wheel and Julia is in the back seat, where I made her sit after we parked. I am fourteen minutes early.

“I could come in with you.”

In the rear view mirror, she looks very young behind those black sunglasses. I know that bringing her along was a mistake, but she gave me no other option. She doesn't ask for permission. I shake my head and she flops back against the seat. “I don't think,” she says, pulling a pack of cigarettes from her hip pocket, “that you appreciate me at all.”

I turn around and face her. “Julia, this is dangerous. These are the facts: there are men in there with a black suitcase and they won't want to part with it. If I let you go in there with me, you might be killed. The fact is that I might be killed, regardless.”

Julia lights the cigarette and blows a cloud of smoke into my eyes. “Nietzsche says facts don't exist, only interpretations.”

“Good for him.” I turn around and remove the piece from the glove box. I feel the weight of it. “Julia, never take advice from dead people.”

She leans over the seat and rolls down the passenger window, angrily flicking the cigarette out onto the street. We stare at each other for a moment, then she slaps me on the left cheek, knocking my sunglasses askew. “So what? We just ignore everything that came before us? Every dead thinker's ideas are worthless?”

I calmly fix my glasses before checking the rounds in the gun. “Unless Nietzsche is going to kick in the front door of that house, I don't really think his opinion matters right now.” Julia settles back into the seat. She uses her lower lip to blow air up toward her forehead—the act of a child. “These philosophers of yours aren't living our lives, are they, Julia? What could they possibly know about us?”

“And what do you know? What do you know about us? Please, please tell me.”

The smile on my mouth feels grim. “I know that we can't last,

because you won't let us."

Julia laughs. "You know nothing. You're a criminal."

"We're both criminals, baby," I whisper. "I'm just more honest about it."

I gently close the car door and make my way toward the orange house, my heavy footfalls drowning the sound of Julia spitting curses at me in French through the rolled up driver window.

The front door is locked but, predictably, the two men who have Nico's suitcase have left the back door unlocked and slightly ajar. I slowly edge it open with the tip of the piece. Somewhere, deep within this house, Jim Morrison is singing faintly. The inside of the house smells of stale food and old, wet newspaper. This place, it tastes of ash.

Softly, softly I am walking across the kitchen, toward the dining room, which connects to a dim living room. Someone is reclining on the couch, watching television without sound. She is young, hair pulled back. When I reach the dining room, I see that the girl is maybe seventeen. She has not seen me.

I sense the movement to my right even before I hear one of the bedroom doors off the dining room click open. This first man, thick and bearded, steps in front of me and I react, fast. A burst of thunder and his left kneecap disappears in a cloud of smoke and powdered bone, a shower of crimson. He tries to cry out. I can see the agony rippling across his creased features. Behind him, at the periphery of my vision, the girl on the couch snaps to life. Falling backward to the floor, the man's head strikes corner of the dining room table. I fire again, first into his chest, then his throat, and move toward the living room.

The girl is shrieking. The girl is wailing. On the coffee table before her is a semiautomatic pistol, the black suitcase, a stack of old magazines, and an old rotary phone.

More movement and I turn but it's too late, he is already on top

of me, too close to fire. We crash to the floor and he strikes me in the face. My gun is pinned under my leg. The blows smart. Salty blood pools at the back of my throat.

The girl is shrieking louder and the rotary phone begins to ring.

I backhand him across the jaw and free the gun, smashing the butt across the bridge of his nose. Blood cascades down onto my face and he and the girl are screaming in unison. I smash him in the face again, and he rolls off of me, clutching at the place where his nose was, while I quickly regain my feet.

Standing over him, straddling him, I look over to the girl. She is balled up on the couch, looking directly at me and the rotary phone rings a third time.

“Do it,” the second man says, spitting up blood and bits of broken tooth. “You win.”

“Shut up,” I say, my breath weak, looking back at the girl. She stops screaming, frozen on the couch.

“I know you,” the man on the floor murmurs. “Everybody knows you.”

“Who am I?” The tide of blood is rising at the back of my throat.

“You’re Nico’s guy, everybody knows that.”

“I’m nobody’s guy.” I fire twice into the place where his face used to live.

The girl on the couch, she is trembling and I put up my free hand to calm her, to slow down my own breathing. Something is wrong, because she’s extending her right hand.

The telephone rings a seventh time.

The girl’s hand is creeping toward the table. Maybe the phone, maybe the gun, maybe the suitcase. Maybe the goddamned magazines.

“Don’t do it, baby!” I point the gun at her.

Her eyes, large and wet, fix on mine. In those eyes there is something innocent and something knowing. Something.

“Please,” I say, “please don’t.”

Her hand is hovering above the table, just above the gun and the ringing telephone. She is sobbing now. The hand begins to descend.

 Holding my breath, I close my eyes.

The water filling the basin in Julia's bathroom is scalding my hands but it does little to remove the blood. The water is so hot that the mirror is fogging and I can feel beads of sweat forming on my hairline as I scrub harder and harder at my palms. It is very difficult to breathe inside this bathroom. The steam chokes me.

 Julia leans against the white doorway molding with a look on her face that I find difficult to catalogue. She is very still and her eyes are fixed on my red palms.

 “Are you just going to stand there, Julia?”

 She says nothing and her eyes never move from my hands, which shake from the heat of the water and the seeming lack of air in my lungs.

 “You could help me, you know?”

 Julia blinks and smiles. “*Je vous aurais bien aide, mais je ne vous aime pas.*”

 The blood finally starts to drip from my hands onto the wet basin, pink streaks trailing down, down, down. As they mix with the hot soapy water and spin down the drain, I think about how water circles in the opposite direction in the southern hemisphere, one of many facts I am supposed to believe, sight unseen.

 “Besides,” Julia purrs, “you don't need my help. You never have.”

Cleaning the inside of the car takes nearly an hour. When I finish, I toss the bloodied rags into a black garbage bag and open the trunk. Inside is the black suitcase I removed from the house. I pull the suitcase out of the trunk and drop in the garbage bag. When I slam the trunk closed, I look around the neighborhood but nobody is in sight. All the windows on the adjacent houses are closed. People

are either not at home or they are locked inside. I tell myself that all of this, not just whether or not I am seen by a neighbor, makes very little difference.

Inside, I place the black suitcase on the kitchen table and take off all my clothes, placing them into another black garbage bag. The bathroom mirror is still coated with a thin layer of condensation. I turn on the cold water in the basin and splash it over my face, rub it into my eyes. When I mat dry my face with a powder blue hand towel, I trace the first three letters of a word onto the foggy glass, then think better of it and rub away the moisture with the back of my left hand.

Julia is sprawled out on the living room couch reading one of her French paperbacks. An unlit cigarette dangles from the left corner of her mouth. She lowers the book and looks at me without a hint of real interest. "I'm truly sorry about before," she says in a flat tone. "Do you have a light?"

In the kitchen, Julia yells something about making dinner, but I can tell that she has no interest in food. I sit on the couch in the living room and stare at the lifeless television screen. I know she is thinking about the black suitcase.

Julia walks in from the kitchen and looks at me and I already know what she is going to ask. "No," I say.

"Why not?"

"It's bad news, baby. You know that."

"So what do we do instead?"

I clear my throat, arch my back and finger the white blinds behind the sofa. From this angle, the world is upside down and the sky outside Julia's window is in the place I'd normally find the ground.

"Let's go away," I say. "We could get married."

"Marriage? You're serious?"

"People do it all the time, baby."

"People do lots of things."

“You won’t even consider it?”

She pads back into the kitchen without a reply.

Outside Julia’s window, a tiny plastic airplane crawls on its stomach across the bright blue ground.

The next morning Julia and I meet Nico in a different parking

lot. I stand very close to him, my knuckles turning white as I grip the suitcase. “There was a girl, Nico. Inside the house, there was a girl.”

“Hey, it happens,” he says.

“No, Nico. It doesn’t happen. It doesn’t.”

“What do you want to do? File a grievance?”

“You never said anything about a girl, Nico.”

“I’m really sorry, pal. I really am.”

“Not good enough.”

“Hey, that’s life, brother. This is a zero-sum game. Somebody has to lose so that I can win.”

“You?”

“You too, brother.”

The hand holding the suitcase begins to tremble and I find myself desperate for a cigarette, a drink, something, anything. Nico smiles and takes the suitcase from my right hand. Into my left, he places a thick white envelope. Trembling, I tuck the envelope into the inside breast pocket of my navy blazer and Nico shakes my hand. He turns away without a word.

After we remove the license plates and dump the Plymouth, Julia and I take a stolen Chevrolet to a diner because we both want omelets. As I drive, I have to roll down the window to let air into the car.

Inside the diner, in our booth, I realize that nearly everything

in a diner is made of glass. There are huge plate glass windows to see both in and out of. The doors are plate glass. The interior walls are lined with mirrors. Everywhere you look you can see yourself

amongst other people and they can see you. Even people outside can see you.

You can never be alone in a diner.

“We could make a movie, you know,” Julia says.

Those mirrored walls are moving toward me now.

“The two of us. Jean-Luc Godard says that all you need to make a movie is a girl and a gun.”

Images of myself, inching closer and closer.

“You’re sweating,” she says, passing me her napkin and I dry my damp forehead.

“I can’t,” I say. “I can’t breathe.” My right hand finds the booth’s plate glass window and it is cold to the touch of my warm fingertips. On the other side of the window, out in the parking lot, a woman opens the rear door of her Ford and places a very small little girl into a stroller. The fabric lining the stroller seat is patterned with ice cream cones. Scoops of orange and brown and green atop those yellow-brown waffle jobs. The woman closes the car door and lovingly touches her daughter’s nose.

“Maybe we should go,” Julia says.

“Where?”

Her eyes widen. “I don’t know. Maybe we’ll get the hell out of here and start something entirely new. Maybe I will marry you someday.”

I sip my water. My hands are shaking and my breathing is shallow. Julia clasps my hand. “Well, what do you think?”

I force a smile. “Sure. Let’s do it.”

“Hey,” she says, “you never told me what Albert Finney said when you ran into him in the middle of the road.”

“You never asked.”

“Well, now I’m asking.”

“He grabbed me by the shoulder, looked me square in the eye and said, ‘Look out for that fucking Jaguar.’”

She grins and lifts her menu. I stagger out of the booth and tell

her that I need to use the men's room. As I walk away, passing image after image of myself, an infinite repetition of me, I look back to see if she watches me go, but her head never turns around. I see her wavy brown hair perfectly framed by the oversized menu.

When I pass the men's room on my right, I continue on to the diner's side door. This door, too, is made almost entirely of glass. I look through the door for a few moments, out at a row of shimmering cars in the lot, before extending my sweaty right palm and gingerly pushing it open. Stepping outside into the brilliant sunlight of the late morning, I do not stop walking west until I've covered a great deal of ground and my breathing returns to normal. It takes a hell of a long time.

