
STUART ROSS
REMEMBER TEETH

There was only one car sitting at the intersection, quivering in the windless night. Tall, motionless trees lined the sides of the roadway. But it was cold, and ice hung from the four-sided traffic light that dangled above the intersection's exact centre. The light was flashing yellow on all sides, and this meant proceed with caution, but Cody wasn't going anywhere. He sat in the car, his forehead leaning heavily against his arms, which were folded over the steering wheel. He stared through bleary eyes into the coffee cup clenched between his thighs, still warm against his crotch. The surface of the coffee rippled slightly with the car's gentle idle, and Cody imagined himself bobbing up and down in the coffee, face submerged and arms floating lifelessly at his sides.

Yeah, that'd be just about the most apt fate for me, Cody thought. Floating dead in a cup of coffee pressed between some guy's thighs. And the guy goes to take a sip, says, "Christ, what's this?", picks me up with thumb and forefinger by the back of my collar, cranks down his window and heaves me—

Cody shook himself. He was forever doing this, letting himself sink into despair whenever he had serious and immediate problems on his plate. And tonight he did have something vast to deal with. He needed a clear mind, a rational attitude, a sense of calm. He certainly wasn't relaxed now. His legs were throbbing from all the walking he'd done, and his heart was pounding like he'd just downed eight coffees. But the one between his legs was his first all day.

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Karin was sitting on the edge of her bathtub, her elbows on her knees, her face in her hands. Even like this, with her eyes squeezed shut, she couldn't seem to close out the hot yellow light above the vanity mirror. She didn't want to turn the thing off, because she was scared to sit in a blackened bathroom crying. There'd have to be something mentally unbalanced about someone who'd do that.

Karin felt a horrible burning in the very back of her throat and flung herself forward again. A thin stream of vomit splashed into the open toilet. She spit a few times, wiped her mouth with a tissue, bunched up the tissue and dropped it into the toilet, then flushed the bowl. She was sure there was nothing left inside her.

Karin pulled herself to her feet and turned to look again in the mirror above the sink. The crimson welt beneath her right eye had gone down a little, and although she was still aware of a steady throb from her cheek up to her temple, she no longer identified it as pain. Tomorrow she would call in sick, and maybe Thursday as well. She hadn't used up her sick day from the month before, so she could probably get away with it. By Friday, the welt might even have disappeared, and if not, she'd use make-up and powder to hide it.

Karin turned off the light and went back to her bedroom to get warm. She looked

at the clock. Lidia would be there in a couple of hours, when she got off her shift, and they'd pack a bag, and Karin would stay with her until after the weekend. She knew she could talk to Lidia.

Under the covers, her chill began to dissipate and her breathing slowed. She could still smell Cody there, but it was a different Cody, not the one who'd hit her in the face tonight with a hardback copy of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. She decided she wouldn't ever see either Cody again and then she went to sleep.

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A small dog—or was it a fox?—came out of the woods and scampered into the middle of the intersection. It stood in the beam of the car's headlights and looked directly at Cody, who was peering down the empty highway, trying to decide whether to drive straight ahead—just keep going—or turn back and try to talk to Karin. He'd left her house about four hours earlier and had spent most of the time since in a bar. He hadn't had much to drink, though; he wasn't much of a drinker. Mainly he'd just sat at the bar, staring at the TV above the bartender's head. He had sat through two situation comedies, a reality show, and a cop show, and when the news began, just before the local station went off the air, Cody had got up and left. In all that time, he'd only had one scotch and soda and three ginger ales. He'd left a big tip, though, to make up for his stingy drinking.

Cody hit the horn once with a clenched fist, and the small animal darted off the road. He was about to drive ahead again, when he realized his pants were wet. He looked down and saw that he'd clenched his thighs together and crushed the coffee cup, forcing the lukewarm liquid up and onto his crotch and thighs. "I can't believe it," he muttered, lifting the battered cup, draining the remaining bit of coffee, and pitching it out the window.

He was going to just drive on, he decided. He'd forget about stopping in some motel for rest, and if he didn't get caught up too badly in the next morning's traffic, he could be home before noon. Maybe there'd be a message on his machine from Karin. Her voice would be slow and devoid of emotion. *While I cannot forgive what you did last night, Cody, I know it was an aberration. We'll give it a week and then let's see what we can work out.*

But Cody couldn't last a week in that kind of limbo. It was difficult enough living so far from Karin, living in a different *province*, for god's sake, and the only way he could bear such an arrangement was to be confident that things were going well. He hated having arguments with her when they lived so far apart. But that wasn't exactly an argument, Cody told himself. I hit her. I hit her in the face with a fucking book.

He wished he hadn't ever moved away. Even though the contract was only for eight months, he should have known he couldn't leave Karin for that long. But it was exciting, because he'd make a lot of money very quickly, and when he returned, they'd move in together. Karin hadn't exactly said she'd go along with it, but that was his plan, and the reward after such a long absence excited both of them. He'd never lived with a woman before.

Was he jeopardizing all this now, by driving home instead of returning to work things out immediately? If he went back now to Karin, he could defuse the situation before she could think herself into hating him, or before her friends got to her. That was the clincher. *Before her friends got to her.* Cody reached down to shift the car into Drive, then

froze with his hand on the gearshift. He looked down at his feet and saw that there was an extra pedal. What the hell was that pedal doing there? Was this car a standard? He'd never driven a standard before. Well, he'd *tried* to drive one once, his cousin Mike's, but he'd been hopeless. They'd bumped around and jerked all over the parking lot where Mike had been trying to teach him. Cody had become impatient and slammed his foot on the brakes, said "This sucks," and hopped out of the car, while Mike slid over to the driver's seat to take him home.

Well, if this car was a standard, he'd simply walk home. But when Cody put his hand on the door handle to open it, he felt a piece of paper there. He looked down and read the handwritten note taped to the handle: STOP. REMEMBER KEYS, GLASSES, TEETH. The keys were still in the ignition of the idling car. Cody was already wearing his glasses. The thing about the teeth was pretty weird, though. Cody probed with his tongue for a moment. Of course he had teeth. But on top of the dashboard was a red plastic cup that he'd been wondering about. He slid it out of the plastic brace that kept it steady and peered into it. Sure enough, a set of pink and white teeth were bobbing about in the cup. Cody fished the teeth out and showed them to the old man in the passenger seat. "These yours?" But Cody could barely make out the man's mouth, so he didn't blame him for not answering. He couldn't see the man's eyes, either, and the hair was matted thick with blood. But the man's nose was big and it stood out from the general pulp of his face. "What are ya?" asked Cody, reaching over and squeezing the man's nose between the knuckles of his first two fingers. "Some kinda wisenheimer?"

Then Cody slid out of the car, jammed the teeth into his own mouth, and began walking back along the long, long road to Karin's.