MISSION STREET

Peter Canning

"WHERE'S JESSE?" ROGER asked.

"Forget Jesse—he's nobody," Frankie said.

Frankie and the Colonel sat on a bench in the plaza eating grinders and drinking Budweiser Tall Boys out of paper bags.

"Sit down," the Colonel said. "Take the load off your feet. There's more beer in the bag there."

"Check come today," Frankie said.

"Where'd he go?" Roger asked.

"Where was it we saw him?" the Colonel asked, lettuce and onion hanging on his lips.

"Down by the water," Frankie said. "He's full of himself today. Colonel say, 'Come on, get something to eat with us.' He just grunt and walk by like he don't know us."

"How long ago?" Roger said.

The Colonel downed the last of his beer, then burped. "Oh, about an hour. Wouldn't you say, Frankie?"

"I don't care," Frankie said. "Save one of those beers for me."

"I don't want one," Roger said.

Frankie cackled. "I hear you had a few last night."

Roger looked off down the street.

"Colonel got so drunk," Frankie continued. "He lost his car keys. He hope to get drunk tonight so he can find 'em."

The Colonel laughed. "I hope so."

"You got tomato on your coat, Colonel."

The Colonel looked down, fingered the slice and popped it in his mouth.

"You think he's still down there?" Roger asked.

"'He's in a surly mood, Roger," the Colonel said. "I wouldn't mess with him."

Roger nodded grimly. "I gotta go," he said.

Roger walked into the Woolworth's and past the cafeteria where old ladies sitting alone and tired mothers with their children ate the $1.89 Salisbury

Steak Special. He cut across the beauty aids section, past the household wares, and then turned up the aisle featuring model airplanes and board games. Roger sidestepped a little boy who was reading a picture book in the middle of the floor.

Roger knew Jesse would have nothing but spit for him if he showed up empty-handed asking for forgiveness. Their one chance to do something big and he goes and gets drunk. Shame on himself. You were lucky if you had one true friend in your life, and you got to keep him believing in you. In front of the toy guns, he stopped.

When he was a kid and his mother brought him shopping, he stood for hours looking at the gun display, sizing up the heavy pearl-handled six-guns with the double holster and loops on the belt that held the white plastic bullets. At home he had posed in front of the mirror imagining he had those guns, drawing like the fastest gunfighter in town, always hitting the mark, then blowing the smoke off the barrels, standing tall and never doing wrong. For Christmas one year, his father had given him a shiny cap-gun. He carried it with him all the time, firing it until it didn't work any more, and even then he kept right on shooting it, making the bang sounds himself.

Roger picked up a small black revolver with a weighty cast-iron handle. A middle-aged woman with glasses hanging around her neck made marks on her clipboard as she inventoried the model paint supplies. In the other direction a girl in a blue smock poured food from a plastic jar into one of the several fish tanks built into the wall. Close by the parakeets chirped wildly. Roger shoved the gun into his belt.

A hand clasped his. "Just a minute, sir."

He turned and saw the woman, glasses now on her nose, staring at him in cold accusation. "I'm afraid you'll have to come with me," she said.

Roger jerked his arm loose.

"Ohh!" she cried. "Stop him!"

He ran past the school supplies, cut left by the barbecue equipment, then raced down the candy aisle.

A heavy-set man in a tie and short-sleeves stepped out from behind a cash register and blocked his path. Roger stopped dead in his tracks. The man approached steadily like a summo wrestler.

Roger pulled out the gun. "Don't fuck with me or you dead!"

The man's face blanched. "Easy now," he said. He held up his hands and stepped backwards.

"This is no game!"

"Okay, buddy, okay. . . ." The man stopped, his eyes shifted to the revolver.

A price tag dangled from the barrel.

"Hey!"

Roger grabbed a loose shopping cart and pushed it at the man, then turned and ran for the door, the cart clattering to the ground behind him as the man stumbled over it.

Roger ran out into the street. A Hertz Rent-A-Truck skidded to avoid him. The driver leaned on the horn, partially muffling the cry, "Stop that man!"

Roger, momentarily shielded from view, ran to the rear of a moving garbage truck. He grabbed the end railing and jumped up onto the running board. The man hanging on the side rail gave him a large, toothless smile.

"Afternoon," Roger said, before glancing back to see his angry pursuer standing in the center of the road looking the other way.

Roger walked out onto the pier where fishermen leaned against the railing and stared down at their motionless lines, buckets at their feet.

A dark figure sat at the end of the dock staring out into the bay, his coat wrapped tightly around him.

"Jesse. . . ." Roger said.

Jesse turned and looked up with sad, distant eyes.

Roger swallowed. "I ain't no bum," he said. He opened his coat to show the gun. "We got business tonight."

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"Roger?" Jesse said, uncertain whether it was Roger or just his old mind playing tricks again.

"We got business," Roger repeated. "You and me going robbing."

Jesse studied him—it was Roger all right, standing there like a big bear in his forty-nine dollar suit. "I thought you quit on me," Jesse said.

"This morning, but I here now. Look I got a new gun."

"Two-ninety-eight," Jesse read.

Roger pulled the tag off. "It fool a man already," he said. "I come looking for you, Jesse. I didn't forget."

Jesse looked past Roger. Down the pier, a fisherman had yanked his line and was reeling furiously. The pole was bent over like a bow. "Look like he got something," Jesse said.

A silver fish shook frantically on the end of the line as it was hoisted up. The fisherman brought the pole over the rail and then tried to grab the fish with his hand. The fish threw itself clear from the hook and hit down on the pier.

"It's kicking too," Roger said.

The fish flapped back and forth on the wooden planks. The man blocked its escape to the water.

"Look at him go." The other fishermen and two passersby surrounded the fish. A fat woman in a sweatshirt kicked it back into the center of the pier. The fish lay still for a moment, its gills panting. The fisherman reached down for it, but he flinched when it started flapping more fiercely than before.

"He'll bite his finger off," Jesse said.

"Only way to kill him with a hammer," Roger said.

The man finally stepped on the fish, pinning it under his heavy boot.

"Or step on him," Jesse said.

Roger shook his head. "Poor fish had no chance."

"Poor fish taste good for dinner though," Jesse said. "Fighting ones the best kind."

The man had put on a glove and held up the fish by the gills. He dumped it in his bucket. Several small children inched up close and peered into the bucket as the man lit a cigarette and commented to the other fishermen on the catch.

"Maybe he rather be a swimming one," Roger said.

"No," Jesse said. "Fish that fight hard shake it soul loose."

"Huh?"

"Rise up to heaven then come down when it rain."

Roger looked quizzically at Jesse.

Jesse sighed and held out his hand. "Help me up now."

They sat on a picnic bench behind the snack bar. As Roger poured ketchup on the french fries, Jesse watched a boat skim across the water, its white sail full of wind. Jesse imagined that when he died he would find himself a passenger on a boat like that one. Sailing to the land where the angels lived. Maybe there he could inquire about his family and find out if he had a son. God knows in his day he'd had his share of women. Maybe there were little Jesses out sailing the world—in kayaks and whaleboats, aircraft carriers and maybe even a submarine. That'd be something.

Jesse looked at Roger's plate and laughed. Tomato and french fry soup. Sometimes Roger was more humor than a man could take. That was okay. A laugh could take a pain away quicker than whiskey.

He watched with an amused smile as Roger licked the ketchup off his fingers. Fighting off five men to get that gun. More like one old lady. Jesse was touched.

"So you want to go through with this robbing business?" he said to Roger.

"Course," Roger said, nodding determinedly. "We got to get some money so we can make our own way."

Sitting there looking across the table at Roger, Jesse smelled brine on the wind. A steam whistle announced itself down at the dock. It wasn't impossible. They could—if they got enough money—get a small boat. Nothing to make a business, but enough to get their own dinner and sell a few fish to the market for spending money. Course they couldn't do it here. They could go south, though. "Ever been to Mexico?" Jesse asked.

"Mexico?" Roger said.

"I been there. Sun shine nearly everyday."

"You mean we hide out there?"

Jesse nodded. "Money go a long way there. Lots of pretty ladies that treat a man right. Baseball in the winter."

"They got fishing too?"

Jesse laughed. "No doubt. Fish there so thick they come out and dance on the water just to get breathing room."

"Mexico," Roger said. "I like the sound of that."

"Let's forget about the market," Jesse said. "We rob the Gold Rush."

An old woman slept in the doorway of a vacant building, her huge stomach protruding from underneath her green fatigue jacket. A yellow cat rubbed itself against her side, then stretched and yawned as it watched Jesse and Roger pass.

"Now you sure you put that car around here?" Roger said.

Jesse stopped. "I think so. Maybe the next street."

"We been there already."

Jesse started up again. "It's down the next street. I remember now, by the warehouse."

"Can't go robbing with no car," Roger said.

"Can't go robbing with no car," Jesse mimicked.

"I serious, Jesse. We been round this corner before."

A thin man in a leather jacket stepped up into the cab of a semi-truck idling outside one of the warehouse doors. Grey smoke came out of the truck's stack as it rolled forward.

"See that," Jesse said, pointing to a battered green Cadillac beyond where the semi had been.

"Why that the Colonel's," Roger said.

"And these," Jesse said as they crossed the street, "the Colonel's keys."

"So you the one."

"He don't need 'em." Jesse unlocked the driver's side. "You drive. I don't see so good any more."

"Okay," Roger said, "You ride shotgun."

They both got in. Roger adjusted the seat back to fit his legs.

"Where'd you find that?" Roger said suddenly.

Jesse had a revolver out and was plugging bullets into the chamber.

Roger looked down to make sure he still had a gun in his belt.

"You think I trust this with you?" Jesse said.

Roger seemed embarrassed as he started the car. "I was so drunk I thought I lost that. Whew! Well, I guess two guns better than one—even if one just a toy."

"You better hope," Jesse said.

Roger backed up the car until it banged the bumper of the car behind him, then he went forward and banged the car in front.

Jesse shook his head.

"I get it," Roger said. He cranked the wheel around and backed up onto the curb, then shot out into the street.

"You a fine driver," Jesse said.

"When we rich, I hire a chauffeur."

"We not going to be rich unless you get us there alive."

"We not going to be rich unless we get us some gas." Roger pointed to the gauge that read empty.

"There's a station up here," Jesse said.

Ahead on the right an Exxon sign sat atop a tall aluminum pole. Roger pulled into the station and up to the service pump.

"How much money you got?" he asked Jesse.

"Seventy-five cents."

"We can't ask for seventy-five cents. This is a Cadillac!"

Jesse rolled down the window. "Fill it up," he called to the attendant, a pimply boy wearing thick frame glasses. "Hi-test."

The boy nodded and went around to the tank.

"Fill it up! Hi-test!" Roger exclaimed. "We got no money, Jesse. What are we going do? Rob the store, then come back and pay for the gas?"

"Need a full tank for Mexico," Jesse said.

Roger looked back at the pumps. The register was almost at three dollars and clicking higher.

"Just do what I say," Jesse said.

A few minutes later, the attendant came to the window. "That'll be twelve forty-two," he said. "Cash or charge?"

Roger looked at Jesse. Jesse nodded back. Roger took out his gun and said, "How 'bout thirty-two caliber?"

The attendant froze. Roger motioned him forward with his finger. "I'll take these," he said, removing the boy's glasses. He started up the engine. "Have a nice day now."

"You did that good," Jesse said, looking back at their victim who stood watching them pull away before turning and running into the office.

Roger beamed. "Like I tell you—you should have seen me at the Woolworth's."

"Bad, huh?"

"I lied before—there weren't five against me—there were ten of 'em."

"And all of them giants," Jesse said.

The rush hour traffic had begun. Roger and Jesse were stuck at a light. The radio played Top 40. Roger's hands were shaking at the wheel. In the distance a siren sounded. He glanced in the rear-view mirror. "Sound like an ambulance. You think?"

"Don't worry," Jesse said. "We not the only ones up to no good."

Roger's eyes darted about the street, his lips pressed together.

"By the time they get to answering that call," Jesse said, "we be wearing sombreros and watching the waves roll in."

The light changed and traffic surged foward. Roger had to brake again when the bus in front of them stopped to pick up more passengers. No one would let him cut over to the next lane. When he finally swung out, the bus was moving again. They both got stuck at the next light.

Jesse looked up at the people in the bus windows. Men with their ties loosened reading the paper. He wondered if any of them looked out and saw him sitting in the Cadillac, if they would be surprised to see an old man like him looking back at them. The traffic started moving again.

"I saw my wife today," Roger said.

"Yeah?" Jesse said. He turned the radio down.

"Thought I'd say goodbye in case anything happened."

"How she doing?"

"I think she glad to see me, though it give her a start. She got a boyfriend now."

"Well, that just mean you don't need to worry about her so much."

"I hope he treat her okay."

"He probably do."

"I don't know what she see in him though."

"Roger, you got to learn. Women don't know their mind. They just like men. Act the way they feel. Sometime they just got to do something or they go crazy. They don't mean no harm—it's just the way it come out. Can't change it once it been."

"I like to learn how one day."

"Good luck."

As they passed the theater, Jesse saw a man on a stepladder putting a new billing on the marquee.

"Maybe we just the wrong type," Roger said. "She seem happy now. But still. . . ."

"Roger. . . ." Jesse said.

"What?"

"You gotta learn to look to the land ahead. Nothing but bad weather behind."

"You full of advice today."

Jesse grunted. "It do you right to listen. Turn here."

Roger hit on his blinker. A woman pushing a stroller crossed the side-street. Roger slowed, then turned the corner.

"We getting close," he said. "Another block."

Jesse nodded. "We do all right."

Ahead a gray truck was parked on the sidewalk while a man unloaded cases of liquor.

"The Colonel and Frankie be wishing they us soon," Roger said. "We send 'em a postcard."

"Mail the Colonel his keys," Jesse said.

They both laughed.

They came to the final light. Jesse saw Roger's hands tighten on the wheel. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

The Cadillac swung out onto Mission Street. The neon lights flashed dimly in the late afternoon sun. There was a brisk business at the newsstand on the corner.

"Pull it right up front," Jesse said.

Roger eased to the curb and shifted the car into park. Two men in blue shirts with tool belts strapped to their waists came out of the Gold Rush carrying six-packs under their arms. Roger and Jesse looked at each other. Roger swallowed.

Jesse took out his gun. Roger took out his. "When we go in," Jesse said, "you take the register on the right. I take the one on the left. Hold the gun in their face. Look mean and don't blink. I keep you covered if they pull anything."

"Jesse?" Roger's hand was shaking so bad that if he had a real gun Jesse would have feared for it to go off right there in the car.

"What?"

"We going to make it?" Roger sat still in his seat.

Jesse smiled and then reached for the door handle. "No doubt," he said.

They got out together, and guns drawn, went in robbing.