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The Unpunished

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The Unpunished

See the girl and the man who keeps her. Here in the small living room, blinds drawn against intrusive eyes, when in the climax of his drunkenness he comes at her.

“Now, now, *now*,” the man says. “Now you dance with me, child.” Wide hands on her back pressing, holding. “Like your mother, child. Like your motherchild!” It is a peculiarity of the Colonel’s intoxication that he does not slur words but plays with them, blends and rearranges. “Just like a childmother,” he says, “a mother’s child.”

Two square feet of danceable space between the coffee table and the television, but Nora does it, she channels her mother into her legs, into her hips, finds the rhythm though there is no music. Her bare feet press the tired carpet covered in ash and spilled liquor and days-old takeout, and she leans into the great weight of the Colonel.

“The motherchild dances!” he calls out, as if to someone in another room. His chin pressing down on her head hard enough to compress the vertebrae in her neck, but she does not resist, though she is neither mother nor child, having turned eighteen this very day. “Dance, mother, dance!” he says. “Sway!”

She complies, careful, on this of all nights, to keep everything the same—her hands here, her feet there, her head not turned but pressed nose-first into his chest as if to leave a mold of her face in his torso. To break any step in the ritual is to make an error that will not be tolerated.

So Nora must not rush, must not betray impatience. The Colonel is a big man; it might take a very long time indeed. Let the digestion and circulatory systems work in their orderly fashion; let his giant black heart pump it steadily all through his oversized body. She can wait. Patience just now is not difficult for her. The secret truth: when he makes her dance, her mother comes to her in a way she does not at any other waking moment, taking up Nora’s burden, moving Nora’s feet here, there, bolstering Nora’s spine to meet the massive bulk pressing down, the sweat coming through his undershirt, the hot breath whistling out of his nose onto the crown of her head. She can wait because her mother does the dancing for her.

So it is not until Nora feels her mother suddenly recede, like a voice in a passing car, that she becomes aware of a change: the Colonel’s breathing grown more labored, louder; his head lolling to one side. He

has stopped narrating their dance, and now he stops moving altogether, as if pausing between songs.

Then she feels him going. She is sure of it; she senses it the way you would the first, imperceptible lean of a falling tree—until he catches himself and suddenly comes to, inhaling a loud snort like someone overcoming sleep. His head jolts from hers, and his hands grip her shoulders and jerk her back with a snap that rips through her neck. He looks at her and his eyes are too clear, too knowing—she understands too late that she did not use enough. Her mother's cousin said go ahead and dump it all in his third drink, when he wouldn't notice an increased bitterness, but Nora held some in reserve, just in case. And God in heaven it wasn't enough it wasn't enough it wasn't *enough*, because his eyes are still very much open, still very much aware, still staring into her.

But look how those eyes quickly change: now alert and suspicious, now darting and confused, now, finally, surprised—the brain registering the body's new internal catastrophe.

He lunges for her, but she sees it coming and darts beyond his grasp. His reaching heaves him over his center of balance, too far to right himself, and then down he goes, down goes the Colonel, hard.

Now see the Colonel's newly leased Lincoln splitting the air over State Highway 12, see the girl driving it hard through the dusk, see the quiet road stretching out wholly submissive to her. Just herself and this broad-shouldered Town Car, so big and so powerful and so fast she imagines a vacuum in her slipstream, the atmosphere itself shocked by her flight.

She likes the g-force pull when she floors it, so she keeps coasting down to about twenty miles an hour and then pounding her bare foot into the accelerator, feeling the leather seat cradle her whole body as the car surges. Gets it up to near eighty and can hardly hear the engine work. Wheat farms and patches of forest fading to night on either side of the two-lane highway, the last town ten miles behind, so soundproofed against the outer world she might be ripping down an underwater road.

She brakes to a crawl coming out of the next bend and then punches it on the straightaway, eyeing the needle's rapid glide around the dial so intently she only half-glimpses the animal flash into the headlights. She does not feel the impact through the wood-wrapped steering wheel, but the deer, bigger than it first seems, takes flight out ahead of the Town Car before disappearing beneath it, a heaving and lurching and distant scraping as it passes under the carriage. And just now the very soonest her hands can respond to the message sent by her brain: she cranks the wheel left as if to avoid the animal already behind her, then overcorrects

right. And then she is in the steep-edged embankment that runs along either side of the highway, the Lincoln at rest and somehow angled up and facing back the way she has come.

She sits there for some time looking straight ahead. The windshield frames a rectangle of starless sky, the headlights cutting into the blackening skyscape like searchlights. The airbag has not deployed, but the engine won't turn.

Her door opens only partway before it strikes one rock wall of the embankment, and she has to squeeze herself out. She scurries up onto the road, where her bare feet can still feel the day's heat leaving the asphalt.

The deer is some distance back, an irregular shadowed lump on the road. In a trick of the failing light, it appears to be moving. She blinks and looks at the Lincoln, wedged into the embankment. The driver's-side window is cracked, and the front right fender dangles free. There is a light about a half mile west. She cannot recall another car coming or going in maybe three minutes, maybe five.

She walks back along the road toward the animal, and as she approaches she discovers it was no trick of the light—it moves. A large buck, struggling to rise, his front hooves clacking and dragging irregularly on the road. He makes no progress because his lower half is not functioning, the hindquarters lifeless and still. An antler rises out of one side of his head, an impressive half-rack with several points; the matching side has snapped off close to the base. The remaining antler swings in crazy eights as the animal fights and wriggles to stand, rolling back on his side and then heaving himself forward before rolling back again, his front hooves now and again tapping the road, straining without rest but never advancing so much as an inch.

It does not look like he will die on his own, so she looks around the dark ground at her feet, then moves into the ditch where she eventually finds a rock as large as her head. She picks it up with some effort and hugs it to her, damp and cold, moving with determination toward the deer. She stops short not from lack of purpose but from the smell—a wet-dog stink, sort of, but more intense than that, things inside a body brought to air, overpowering the wheat and soil smell around them. She hesitates, trying to determine if she will throw up, and then she suddenly sees the animal very clearly, sees the wild variation in the shading of fur and the way his narrow gray tongue hangs from the side of his mouth as he labors, and she understands they've been captured in the headlights of an approaching vehicle. The light reveals the way

the animal's rounded black eyes ignore her and her large rock and focus singularly on the copse of cedars forty yards beyond the embankment, straining toward the dark and open land beyond.

"You're bleeding from the head there, dear heart," the man says. He is smallish, perhaps only three inches taller than her, lean but wound tight, a thing poised to uncoil in a snap. He pulled to the shoulder some twenty feet back, then hopped out of his car and trotted to her, smiling apologetically, as if late to arrive. The man's eyes are wide and the whites vivid. When he speaks to her he stands very close, putting his face so near hers his head eclipses the sharp light of his car's headlights. "Must be back above your ear." The man reaches for her quickly and, before she can react, lightly touches the side of her head. He withdraws a bloody finger for verification, his face migrating toward a smile meant, perhaps, to comfort. "See there?" he says.

She cradles the large rock with one arm and reaches up with the other to explore the extent of this head wound. The night is quiet but for the sound of the deer's struggles, his clacking, scraping hooves, though the man doesn't appear to notice. She keeps looking toward the buck with the idea of drawing the man's attention to him.

"How'd you get your luxury vehicle folded in there like that?" This man gives off a current—electric—buzzing in a radius around him. She takes one step to break free from it, but he follows with his own subconscious step toward her. A one-step dance. The deer ignores the two humans standing not five feet from him, straining and writhing as if he might through sheer effort awaken the hindquarters and rise up.

"Trying to avoid hitting him," she says.

The man sucks his teeth sharply. "Didn't your daddy ever teach you about that? Suppose a semi was coming the other way. Now you've done damage to an eighteen-wheeler, plus traumatized that poor driver on account of your own death, not to mention slowed commerce, because people are waiting for the goods he carries. And on top of it ruining a perfectly good Town Car, which you have done in any case. Brand new, is it? And here you've got it bent like a goddamn banana." He nods once. "I don't think that right rear tire is even touching the ground." All this he says cheerfully, with his face so close she tastes salami on his breath, mint Breath Saver over it. "What is it you intend to do with that?" he asks.

She looks down at the rock in her hands, and for the first time the man looks directly at the buck. They watch the animal swing and kick and strain, unceasing, though his efforts have flagged some.

He gives her a pointed look. "You're sure welcome to have at it with your stone there. But I guess your hesitation shows some sense. Liable to poke your eyes out, is my thought. No."

He turns and walks back to his car, leans inside for a moment, and emerges with a large pistol in one hand. As he comes back he pauses by her. "Smell that?" He breathes in deeply through his nose, his slight, stout torso filling. "It's trying to rain." Then he walks over and stands directly between the buck and its intended path toward the far-off cedar trees, now almost invisible against the night. "Stop it," he says. "Hold still, now." But the buck moves with fresh panic, the hooves making a sound on the asphalt almost like running. Before this frantic scrambling the man stands motionless, legs planted shoulder-width apart, solid as a featherweight. At last he hisses something in sharp staccato and the deer abruptly stops moving, looking at him for the first time.

Not until the gun goes off does she realize she's been hoping against reason the creature would find the key to unknitting itself, that it would rise and leap silently over the man and disappear into the darkness beyond the road.

The man, who looks old but moves young, stuffs the pistol into the waist of his jeans, then takes the buck by one hoof and his remaining antler and, leaning back against the weight, drags him to the edge of the shoulder. She discovers the rain has begun falling on the road and the dead animal and this wiry man as he walks over to her too quickly and holds out his hand and tells her his name is DeWitt. His hand is dry and bigger than she expects, and she can feel bone under muscle as he grips hers, just short of inducing pain. "Here it comes," he says, looking up into the sky to face the rain with wide eyes. "And you'll be wanting a ride, I gather."

His face gives nothing away. She is unsettled by the fact that she cannot get a steady read on this man, cannot piece together his intentions or mood. When he looks at her now, his eyes bore into her own so intensely she worries he can examine every thought in her head. His head tilts. "Or maybe," he says, "maybe you're thinking you don't want a ride from old DeWitt." He juts his lower lip and nods once; he is wounded like a child.

She opens her mouth to deny it but is spared the lie when headlights wink into view. There passes a long moment as the car comes on, high-beaming them through large raindrops that strike the pavement audibly. One drop strikes Nora square on top of her head and awakens the nerve endings there, drawing her attention to the wound, which has begun

to throb. And DeWitt too close, too close, watching her as she watches the oncoming vehicle, which reveals itself to be a pickup, its lights hot on her skin.

On an impulse Nora holds out her thumb.

The pickup slows. Glowing in the dashboard lights, a ghost-like face stares at her as it rolls by, a man of indeterminate age looking right at her, meeting her eyes as she shows him her thumb, right up there where he can't miss it. The pickup coasts, begins to ease toward the shoulder. But then the brake lights go dark and the engine rises as the truck accelerates out of this place.

She watches its headlights illuminate a shrinking silo of night until the taillights flutter red and disappear entirely. Then she turns back to DeWitt, who has not stopped staring at her, the gun protruding handle-first from his belt. He seems not to notice the rain, though it bounces from his mostly hairless scalp as it would off concrete. She shrugs and tries a meek smile. "The devil you don't know," she says. One of the Colonel's favorite expressions.

See the girl now, sitting in the small man's '77 Dodge Colt, see her wet and shivering, debating the best method to separate this man from the gun stuffed in his pants.

"This is a *cleansing* rain," DeWitt says. He switches on the defrost, putting the fan to high to combat the fogging windows. They are still parked on the shoulder of the quiet highway. "In most places, your sky and your earth are two discrete entities," he says. "You think of them distinctly."

The rain rakes the roof so hard Nora imagines it leaving tiny dents all over the car's thin shell. She buries her hands in the sleeves of her sweatshirt and says, "Let's go."

DeWitt juts his chin and looks out the bottom of the windshield, where a crack rainbows up and back down from the hood. "This rain here may as well be shooting up from the earth as falling from heaven."

She tries to think what this man reminds her of. An animal. Something twitchy and slight but muscled and silent-moving and steady. Bigger than her, but not by much, and if she has to, she will go for the eyes, the genitals, she will scratch and swipe and swing and claw, and she will get that gun before he can try it. Whatever it is he has in mind. "Can we get going?" she asks. She looks once more at the mighty Lincoln, pointing up into the rain like a wayfarer's mark in the dark.

DeWitt follows her gaze and nods at the wreck. "Somebody's like to be plenty sore when they find out what you did to their Lincoln Town Car."

"Not if it's my Lincoln Town Car, they won't. Then I'm the only one who'll be sore about it." She pulls her damp hair back into a quick ponytail, using the twisty on her wrist to secure it. The tug at her scalp reactivates the tender wound, sending a throb down her neck. She decides there is no need to punch and claw. There are better ways.

"Could be," DeWitt says, though his tone suggests he thinks not.

"Well," she says, "suspicion haunts the guilty mind." The Colonel again.

"Does it," DeWitt says. "Let's see, now. We've got a girl with no shoes on her feet, no phone, no possessions of any kind. Not even a question about where I'm headed. Just get going, she says. Seems like maybe she departed in panic, hell-bent to get away." He raises his eyebrows. "How's that story fit?"

She puts her feet on the seat and hugs her legs, wiping her nose across her knee and looking straight ahead. "As of tonight I don't have a story," she says. "I'm at the very beginning. I'm newborn in the world."

DeWitt drives slowly, under fifty, though the force and velocity of the rain coming at them through the dark makes it feel much faster. The road this far out is a mystery to her. Even before she hit the deer she'd already outgained the towns she knew, Highway 12 this far out on the map just a lonely red line stabbing westward.

And the gun is there when it must be here. He is always moving, tapping his thigh or drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, fiddling with his ear, bouncing his leg. Get him talking first, she thinks. Start there.

"What was it you said to that deer to get him to stop writhing like that?" she asks. She must raise her voice to be heard against the straining engine and the way the outside world comes whistling and rattling into the tight cab space. "What'd you whisper to him?"

DeWitt seems unsurprised by the question. "Me and your furry friend had an understanding for a second there before I sent him on his way. We acknowledged it together."

"I saw that," she says. "What'd you say?"

DeWitt shakes his head. "That stays between me and him."

"Be that way," she says. "But I hope you scolded him for his timing. If he hadn't picked that very instant to cross the road, all three of us would have had a much better night."

DeWitt shrugs. "He was just doing as his nature compels. No choice."

Yes, Nora thinks. And though there is something in this man that seems not ill intended, she knows better, knows what *his* nature compels. She has trained herself to look at it from their eyes. Here's this young girl, soaking and stranded, in need of help, of rescue, all alone out here. Help her out, let her settle into the thought that she is just a guest in your car. But keep that gun in her line of sight lest she think she has any choice in what's coming.

The best defense is a good offense (the Colonel yet again), so she lays out in her mind the four steps to a potent offense. Step one is eliminate all fear from your mind and your body. Step two, assert that you are in charge. Step three, see it happen, imagine it into being. And step four is do it.

So. Pick any of these turnouts, these dirt roads snaking off the highway toward nowhere, tell him you have to pee and can he just pull off, a bit farther, out of sight of the road for modesty, yes, perfect. Then, when he kills the engine and snuffs the lights, tell him you're sorry for your testy behavior. Tell him you're sorry you didn't trust him. He's a good man, tell him, that's clear. Tell him you just want to feel safe, you just want to thank him.

Do not tell him you guessed what he wanted from the moment he pulled off the road, up-and-downing you with his eyes. Jerky, electric, twitchy. Do not tell him what you come from is worse than anything he thinks he might do to you. Do not tell him what you might do when you get that gun in hand.

Do assume the confident, directive tone they respond to. Say, Buster, I want you to move that seat all the way back right this instant, and he will, and then tell him to yank down those trousers and be quick about it, and the gun will drop to the floor, but she'll be moving before he can think of that. Stay just like that, she'll say, and because he is so slight there will be room enough for her to crawl atop him right there in the driver's seat, face out the windshield, put her hands on the wheel and give him a view, wet jeans and underwear hanging off her right leg. Pause right there, just over him. Let his focus constrict to one essential need. And then in one quick, breath-stealing moment lower herself and at the same time slide the gun along the floorboard with the heel of her foot.

Then, the hardest part over, use his eagerness against him and bring him along quickly whether he wants to follow or not. Fill him with surprise and gratitude and then in that weary exhaustion they get after, when he is spent and resting his head back on the seat with eyes closed,

scoop up the gun and glide back to her seat and train that pistol on his temple. Let him feel cold steel against his flushed skin.

Maybe she would shoot him and maybe she wouldn't. She'd do as her nature compelled.

They have come out of the rain. DeWitt flips off the wipers. The highway is dry and the road noise tolerable, but DeWitt is shaking his head, as if they've been debating something. "The devil you do know?" he says. "I'm the devil you *do* know in your scenario back there? Do I have that correct? I'm the devil you know and some stranger in a truck is the devil you don't, and he's somehow preferable?"

She shrugs and tries for nonchalance. "It's just a saying."

"Well, I don't take kindly to what it implies. I stopped to *help* you."

"No good deed goes unpunished," she says, and she realizes this is the third time this night the Colonel has spoken through her. There will not be a fourth.

"Well, I guess I'm just a pitiful fool, then," DeWitt says. He looks deflated and once again makes no sense to her. Nothing he does fits. But still—she needs to turn his head around. Step four is do it, and it's time. Mother, she prays, you get back here and help me do this. Help me sell it, let me betray no tells. Come and do this thing for me, move my hands and my body so I can go blank and stony until it's done.

She makes her voice soft. "I really hate to say it, Mr. DeWitt, but it just hit me that I've got to pee super bad. Can we stop at one of these turnouts real quick?"

"I will be goddamned," DeWitt says, speaking to his side window as if someone is there. They have stopped at a rutted and gravel-covered pull-off, and the dust they made has caught up to them, filling the headlights and enshrouding the little Colt. "She is propositioning me," DeWitt says, "right here in my own vehicle."

"It's not like that," she says. She does not believe his coyness for one second. "I guess," she says, "I guess I just like how safe you make me feel." Her hand goes to his forearm, a light touch on the tight skin and the muscle knotted beneath it.

DeWitt looks at her hand on his arm in a way that makes her retract it. She feels her panic about to boil over and quickly revises her plan. She tightens her fists and watches the gun, bracing herself.

DeWitt sighs. "Listen to me now very carefully, Nora. I am almost sixty years old. I don't have a whole lot left in the tank down there, but what I do have is saved for a woman who's been married thirty-two

years. Saving it all for her. This is none of your business, but I tell it to you so that you understand that I have no interest in spending it on you, not the slightest interest whatsoever. To my eyes you're not yet even a woman. I stopped for you because my guilt would be unpleasant to live with if I drove on by. Used to be fellow travelers helped each other as a matter of course, and I would like to imagine that time is not yet fully disappeared from the earth." He looks directly into her eyes. "It is a particular combination of vanity and paranoia to think I have designs on your person. You do yourself a disservice." A pause. "Do you understand what I'm telling you, Nora? You have other tools available to you to make your way in this world."

As he speaks, a heat rises to her face, her panic turned to embarrassment bordering on shame. "Oh, okay," she says, soaking her voice in sarcasm. "I understand just fine. I'm the crazy one. *I'm* the one who's paranoid," she says, though she hears no confidence in her voice. "But you're the one who has me in your car. You're the one with the gun right there at the ready where we both can see it." She crosses her arms and looks out her window, willing the heat to leave her face.

DeWitt does a double take. "Jesus Christ," he says. He moves his hand to the pistol, rising off his seat to withdraw it from his pants. He holds it up. "This is what's bothering you?"

She presses all the way back against her door, expanding as best she can the space between them.

"Hell," DeWitt says. "Take it, then." He holds it toward her, handle-first. "Here."

Nothing in her eighteen living years has prepared her to understand what is happening. Something has stolen the breath from her lungs, and her stomach rises as if she's falling from a height. What trick is this what trick is this what trick is *this*.

"Go on," DeWitt says. "Take it."