

## On Human Vanity and Refrigerator Magnets

by Leviathan Joe

She answered the phone: “Hey, what’s going on... how was the conference?... I took care of that... yes, just like you said... I’m finishing up some papers, I should be out of here soon but I got some stuff to drop off... When does your plane leave?... oh... Oh, really? So, you’ll be home soon, then?... oh, hon, don’t bother with that, I don’t even know when I’ll get home... what?... alright then. I don’t know. Surprise me. Something cold... ok, well, the phone’s dying, so... yeah, love you, too. Bye.” She hung up.

Raf stared at her from the passenger seat and waited. She sat stiffly with both hands on the wheel and made him wait. The Escort sat idling amidst the constipated southbound traffic sprawl on the freeway out of the city. It was 4:30 on a Friday afternoon and the sun blared into the car as if summer had come. She might have cut the engine but for the heat. They could smell the leather briefcase in the back seat. She stared straight ahead, bland-faced behind her sunglasses.

“Well...” he said. “What’s going on?”

“He’s back early.”

“Well... what does that mean, then?”

She shrugged. “Nothing to us. He’ll wait around for me. Eventually he’ll get a call from the dean asking him why there’s 50 grand missing from his department. Well, he told his wife deposit it for him. Why did he have it in the first place? That’ll be a tough one for him... Mike will eventually put it together. They all will. They’ll wonder why I did it and then they’ll notice you’re not showing up to classes.” Angie paused and cocked her head. “I just wonder if he’ll save his own ass somehow. Hm.”

Raf took this in, not amused. “We were supposed to be 500 miles away by the time *anyone* caught on.”

“I realize this.”

“We could hit the bank right now,” he said. “Deposit the money and bail while we still have the chance.”

“Okay,” she said. “We’ll go to the bank.” They just sat there with the other cars, jammed. Raf twisted in his seat and stuck his head out the window to appraise this.

“So are we fucked then, or what?”

She shrugged and drummed her finger on the wheel. The heat thrummed inside the car like a granite bass note.

“It’ll take us an hour to even get out of the city,” Raf said.

“Don’t worry, we’re going to the bank,” she said sourly.

Raf popped off his seatbelt and puffed audibly. He writhed in the sticky leather. He yanked at his T-shirt collar. She ignored him. What was she to do?

“I need something to drink.” He saw the gas station fountain drink cup in the holder. “Is that from lunch?”

“Yes, it is.”

It was hot and flat, like sweet mucous. The straw made a shrill raking sound through the lid’s plastic orifice as he drank. Then he flicked on the radio and scanned the stations, settling on a squawking match on a political talk show. Now it was she who squirmed.

“You need a break from this.” Angie said.

“I like to know what’s going on,” he insisted. “You know, keeping up with the world? Being informed?”

She rolled her eyes behind her sunglasses. “I know. You’re so conscientious.”

“I’m not gonna be one of these idiots out here with their heads buried in the sand,” he said, flicking his fingers at their hapless brethren.

“I know you won’t.”

“Most people *don’t* care about this.”

“They don’t seem to, do they?” She remembered what it had been like to discover politics in her early twenties, when she had really begun to care about things, when the landscape of the human condition had begun to shape like a playground in the fog.

She flipped down the visor and opened the mirror. She released the clip from her sensible bundle of brown hair, flipped it about with her fingers and fastened it back again. The sunglasses hid some of the age scrawl radiating from her eyes. Hollows to the checks of her small, tapered face. Laugh lines bitterly elaborated by years of passive regret and institutionalized smoking.

She flipped over the radio station with a button on the wheel, ending the pundits’ cyclic bluster. Madonna now.

“I was listening!”

“Like I said, you need a break.”

“Can’t I just listen to what I want so I don’t lose my shit in the middle of goddamn gridlock?”

“Dive into politics like that and you’ll smack your head on the bottom. Just ease way up. ‘Deign on the passing World to turn thine eyes, / and pause a while from Learning, to be wise.’”

“What’s passing? We haven’t moved in ten minutes!” He took a breath. “Who was that, anyway?”

“Samuel Johnson.”

“Of course. I know how to unwind, by the way.” He drew a tight, thin joint from his breast pocket.

She shook her head despite the little flutter in her heart. “I’m sure that’s just the thing you need to keep your head straight,” she said dryly.

He put it back in his pocket; he was only making the point, anyway. “Well, I definitely do not need Madonna.

“Fair enough.” She scanned the stations, settling on a plucky, familiar tune. The Proclaimers. “How’s this?”

“Tolerable.”

Traffic opened up after a few more exits. They coasted longer between stops and even made use of the gas. More exits and more breathing room. Ten minutes later they crossed the city limits, passing industrial complexes and storage lots. Some wind whipped into the open window. More and more cars dropped away.

“We’re fucking doin’ it,” Raf said.

Angie looked at him, seeing the tension melt from his neck and shoulders. Her exasperation eased. He even flashed his grin at her, his blue eyes almost manic with glee. She tingled. She wanted to cry. She grabbed a handful of brown hair on the back of his head and yanked his face close to hers, lips parting instantly, their tongues pressing together, insisting the moment into one another’s mouths.

The road opened up. They drove on past the refineries and the fireworks stands, past the farm properties set back in the fields, past the Spring-swollen bogs where the old telephone poles listed and dragged their brethren into the muck.

Dusty gusts rocked the car as it squatted in the dark roadside ditch that night. They were sprawled naked in the back seat, clutching each other in cramped repose. Ardent expirations condensed on the windows, the black night without. Bad joints and bad leverage left their lovemaking unresolved. Raf had worked and worked until he'd had to step naked into the balmy night for air, straw husks underfoot. Waves of their charged heat rolled from the car into the night.

"We need a motel." Raf said, laying now with his head on the armrest, leg thrown up on the back dash. She lay against him, an arm and a leg draped over. The briefcase rested on his abdomen, bobbing with his breath. "I can't do anything here."

"They'll be looking for the car," she said.

"What are we doing about that?"

"Don't worry. I know a place for plates and a paint job. Then we can get that motel. Then we go straight for the border. Then we keep going. Home free."

"How does 'keep going' mean 'home free'?"

"Why don't you think we'll make it, Raf?"

"What's 'making it'?"

She scoffed. "White sand beaches, body surfing, sunburns, flip flops, a nice set of hotel sheets for us to ruin, skinny dipping at sunrise... you know, paradise?"

"Ah, okay."

"That's what we're really doing here, Raf. This is my retirement, get it?"

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. I guess I'm a little surprised that that's how it boils down, even to a philosophy professor."

She looked at him, traced his lips with her finger. "Do us a favor and forget about the fucking universe for a bit, just until we make it. Then we'll have all the time we could ever want to deconstruct or whatever you wanna do. I'll be up for it as soon as I get drunk."

"I just can't believe what we're doing. Just can't. It's insane."

She lifted her head and looked up at him, their gazes searching and masked in the dark. "I can count on you, right? I'm planning to get there. I'd like to see that you can keep your head until then. You're thinking about it way too much."

"So I think about things. I think about what *this* means. *This* all means something. Like Keorauc."

"Number one: never have I, nor would I, assign Kerouac for any purpose. Two: don't worry, I 'get it'. Three: this about us. You and me taking for ourselves and fucking each other stupid. That's it. Get to be my age and you'll realize that's all there is to it."

"Okay." He smiled a bit. A bit more to placate her.

"Don'ch'ya like money, babe?"

"I do like money."

"Well, there you go. Relax. Think of that tight stomach of yours with a tan. There'll be plenty of those spring break hussies for you to ogle. I'll buy you all the pot you want. C'mon, these are your twenties. This blows Kerouac all to hell."

“Alright.” He seemed satisfied. She laid her head back on his chest. He *hmmm*-ed and she melted into the drum-like reverberations.

“Pop quiz,” she said. “Justify taking the money in thirty seconds or less. Go.”

“Easy.” He cleared his throat. “He gambled it away. He may have walked away even but that doesn’t change the fact that he was willing to risk it and did. His luck ran out, just not at the tables.”

“‘B’ minus. That only works if you assume my taking the money had something to do with his gambling it.”

“Opportunity.”

“Opportunity isn’t motive. And besides, you’re saying it was just his rotten luck to end up marrying a thieving whore. In fact, now that I think about it, I’m giving you a ‘C’”

He gaped. “Are you kidding me? That’s airtight! You’re bringing all kinds bias and perception shit into it.”

“Okay, you’re right, ‘A’ minus. Minus because you’re such a pain in the ass.” He grinned. “You know it. Now tell me what the ‘A’ plus answer is.”

“For taking the money?”

“Yeah.”

“I already told you. I’m just taking it. For me.”

He stared at her while he processed.

“You can think your whole life away and only come up stuff that’s been on refrigerator magnets for decades.”

“Okay.”

“You know, it’s good thing you’re such a marvelous fuck because I would not have brought you along otherwise.”

He laid his back on a rolled up sweater and closed his eyes. “I know.”

He seemed content, but to her he seemed like a child at the airport, clutching her idle hand amidst the chaos.

They drove on after a sleepless night across the plains, the sun burning brighter and hotter. They got new plates and paint, the paint still drying as they drove on in the blasting dust. They doubled back a few hundred miles and drove the state roads back towards the border. There was a roadside diner that the trucks no longer passed where they devoured fat cheeseburgers and gulped cold off-brand colas. She drove and cycled through the dozen CDs in the visor sleeve: Paul Simon, Elton John, Fleetwood Mac, Aerosmith. He settled in and smoked his joints and shared some with her. They drove on and stripped down in the heat, stealing glances at each other’s red and sweating faces and weary expressions of wanting and resolve.

That night they found the squat, battered motel, still and adrift on the black desert like a houseboat on an inky bayou swampnight. The fly-zapper and vending machine light shone on the sun-scoured wooden panels. While she secured the room, he sat sweating on a bench in the white buzzing glow of the old Pepsi machine. For a quarter he pulled back the glass door and lifted a tab, ejecting a cold and sweating can from the slot. He drank it down and slapped at bugs, waving them toward the cage of the ever-crackling cylinder of blue light.

They parked in back. A shell of dust was embedded into the paint job. Somehow it was cool in the room. They fastened the chain and undid their buttons, drew close and

sprawled back. All in. They cut quite a scene in the mirror on the far wall, illuminated only by the blue lights, their eyes frenzied, shadowed, and searching for one another's. Their husky groans pounded over the thin faux paneling and sent the night critters to scurrying along the walls to seek deeper shadows.

Day pounded through the windows. And a fist on the door. Her eyes snapped open.

"Angie Matterson, open up! Open up now!" A deep, insistent male voice that conversed with others. She sensed far more activity outside the windows than should ever be outside such broken-down desert hovel.

She shook Raf awake. "Wake up, goddamn it! Get the briefcase. Come on!"

"Open up or we will break the door down!"

His eyes snapped open and stayed wide. "Oh, shit."

"No time. Give me the briefcase, take the keys and jump out the back."

"No way, they're out there, too." He saw her fumbling with the briefcase snaps. "What the hell are you doing? You think we can bribe our way out of this? What the... oh, shit."

She lifted the .22 revolver off the scattered bill bundles. She knew the cylinder was full. She stared hard at him, both of them stark naked. "We're leaving this place. Nobody is going to ruin this for us. This is my fucking retirement."

Raf was sweating but pale.

"Come on," she said. She led him to the bathroom and told him to open the window. When he did she started shooting. "Jump out and start the car."

"I don't have any clothes."

"You have the keys, stupid."

"Yeah, but my clothes--"

"Get out and start that car, and I'll give you the best blowjob of your life."

"I'm gonna get fucking shot!"

No moment further she brat-thwacked the pistol barrel across his cheekbone and temple. "Out!" she shrieked, hit him again and again on the shoulder blade until at last he sprang onto the sill and dropped outside, scampering nude across the brush and ducking into dusted Escort, ignoring the two uniformed officers with bullets in them writhing in the dirt, ignoring the third, who came from around the corner and fell with the third gunshot. He got the car started, and she came out with the briefcase, lunging over the ground, to the car. The leather seat was like hot wax on her naked flesh.

He was in the driver's seat, the engine running. "Fuck this, Angie. No way am I doing this. I'm getting out of this car."

She stuck the gun in his face. "Drive, you little bitch."

"I'm leaving. I am." He opened the door and threw out his leg. She pointed at his knee and got it. After that she forced him to switch sides. She slammed the gas and the wheels sprayed up dust before the car lurched around the corner to the front lot of the motel, bouncing one officer off the hood against a dumpster, slamming another's shins so that he flopped across the hood of the Escort and bounced his forehead off the windshield. He lolled there on the hood and finally rolled off when Angie weaved around the four parked highway patrol cars and found the pavement and sped off down state road. She ducked at the volley of pistol fire, wincing at the metallic *thwocks* that peppered the car's body around the wheel wells.

Raf slumped over in the passenger's seat, trying to favor the anchor of pain his shattered leg had become.

Only one vehicle pursued. They matched speed down the weed-split state road for five minutes. She had two shots left.

The horizon ahead curved at them and opened up to blue. "Come on, babe," she said. "There's the ocean."

"You crazy, crazy bitch," he muttered, still hunched over, blood pulsing into his ass as it drained from his leg down the leather seat.

She drove on, the diamond blue sea overtaking the dry, white plains. It sent a cold splash up her spine. She knew she was crazy. She kept her speed even as the road ran out of land and arced along the staggered edges of the ocean bluffs. She drove on knowing that state police had been radioed and were most likely burning the wick at the other end of this road.

The highway patrolman began closing the gap, slinging along turns while her battered Escort lurched and skidded. Around the next turn she slammed on the brakes and turned the pistol out the back of the window, naked, focused, waiting for her pursuer to come around the turn, and when he did she stopped her breath and took the fifth shot, a wild shot that powdered a pocket in the dashboard window in front of the driver's head. The bullet didn't penetrate but the driver flinched and softened the turn for the slightest moment and lost course. She barely comprehended that the car wasn't going to sail on past when it slammed straight into their rear and sent the Escort over the bluff into a thrash of color and force.

She woke up in the sand, the water muttering a little bit away. Her eyes opened to the ocean, gem blue and searingly alight in her swollen, concussed brain. She groaned and lifted her head, saw herself naked and splashed with dusty blood that had dried and broken into plates. Swirling nausea overtook her and she dropped her head back down, breathing sharply through her nose. As she did she caught the twinge of a familiar scent on the breeze. The heavy, charged sweat of her young lover.

*I'm hungover. We got shit-faced and fucked on the beach. Maybe got mugged. I should check him out, make sure he hasn't puked himself a sand pillow.*

She rolled over and saw the overturned car, bent and battered awkwardly into the sand like a bad community art project. The highway patrol vehicle rested a little way up the bluff; ablaze, the figures in it still and slumped.

She found Raf in the weeds beside the wrecked Escort. She crawled over to him. His face was swollen and purple, blood in his mouth. An indigo bruise blotted out most of one side of his hip and abdomen. Limbs at bad angles.

He was awake.

"Why are we on the beach?" His eyes flicked around and he spoke slowly.

"You got us out of there, remember?"

"Yeah... wait, what?"

"I promised you the best blowjob of your life if you got the car started."

His eyes slowed a little. "Oh yeah. Hey, so.... What happened here? I mean, why are we..." he saw the car. "Oh. Shit."

"Congratulations. And I always keep my word." She tried on a sexy look, but it only winced out her tears.

He grinned a little. “Can we take a rain check, though? I’m actually kinda fucked up today. Don’t look at me.”

“I like it. You look like a football player.

“I just need... I just need to get my head straight. Hey! Did you pack a toothbrush?”

“No, Raf, I forgot.”

“Me neither.”

She tried to touch him somewhere without hurting him. She gave up. “Right, you sleep it off.”

“Yeah, I can sleep it off and then you can do it. Give me that blowjob. That would be nice.” His eyes lensed again and began rolling around. He blinked sand into his eyelashes. Angie scraped out the grains with her pinky nail.

“Sleep it off...” he was saying. “Sleep it off...”

She managed to sit up and crawl over to find the revolver in the dune grass a few feet from the car. That last shot was still there. She went back to see Raf, slumped to her knees beside.

“Hey, where ya goin’?” he sputtered through the blood.

“We should eat. I’m gonna go shoot us a fish.”

“Okay. Do that.” His eyes closed. “Wait a minute. Hey, you know somethin’...?”

She waited while he vocalized senselessly for a bit. “What’s that, babe?”

“I realized somethin’. Everything important is on refrigerator magnets.”

“That’s right, babe.”

“Yeah, I knew it. I knew it...” He was quiet. His body heaved irregularly, muscles locked to fading signals. He slowly relaxed. She was careful not to disturb him when she got up and stumbled away, leaving him in to the grass and the shade.

So nice to take this naked stroll down the beach while he slept, while the sirens were still faint in the distance. Her toes clawed into the packed sand at the waterline. The sea was warm, the surface clung to her ankles like a flattering accessory. Her vision pulsed and faded. She staggered and splashed in on her back, bearing the gun above the surface even as she reclined and lolled in a foot of water. She came up sputtering and giggling. She sat in the water and looked up at the clouds, wondering about them and about what to do while resting her chin on the barrel of the gun. Maybe she’d sit there in the water a bit more, naming clouds, before using it. Maybe she’d continue her stroll and find a cove or a tide pool.

Or maybe she’d swim out to the island she thought might be there.