

# Extortionist

*by* Craig Lancaster

He took a sip off the longneck and handed the bottle to her. She lifted the cold glass to her forehead and held it there a few seconds before taking a gulp of her own.

“Crazy hot,” she said.

“Yeah.”

They leaned against the hood of his pickup, which sat heavy on its wheels, the back of it filled with the things that he'd held out of the yard sale three days earlier.

“When're you leaving?” she asked.

“Early. Get on down the road. Shut 'er down early.”

She handed the bottle back. “No chance you'll stay on a bit?”

“No.” He took a swig.

“Don't backwash that thing, mister.”

He tilted his head to her, his cheeks bubbled up, holding the beer. She was grinning at him. He swallowed and handed the last of it over to her.

“You've had my spit in your mouth before.”

She drained the last of it. “Boy, you are romantic.” She leaned toward him, putting her shoulder into his bare right arm. He lifted his arm and she wriggled in, close enough to smell the day's work on him. He wrapped her up, pulled her in tight.

“You want me to stay tonight?” she asked. She pressed her chin against the chambray.

“You want to?”

“I do.”

“It's just a sleeping bag on the floor. House is empty.”

“I know. It's okay.”

“I'm leaving early. Won't get much sleep.”

“You already said. I'm not thinking of sleep.”

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Afterward, she lay her head on his chest and listened as his heartbeat wound down to a normal rhythm.

"I'm gonna miss this," she said.

"We said we weren't talking about that." His words rumbled in his chest, leaving her with an odd sense of stereo — the unadulterated sound entering the ear exposed to the open air, the more guttural, interior version coming through the other.

"We're not. Not really."

"Then what're we talking about?" He sat up a bit, propping himself on his elbows. Roused from her resting spot, she sat and faced him, the sheet she'd wrapped herself in falling to her waist.

"Nothing. I just ..."

"What?"

"I don't know. I guess I didn't believe you were really gonna go back. I mean, I know you said you were, but ... well, I just thought you'd decide to stay."

He sat up fully, pulling in his knees. He dropped his head and kept it there awhile. She pulled the sheet back up and draped it over her shoulders, covering her breasts.

"Look," he said, "I never led you on about anything."

"I know."

"I appreciate everything you've done for Mom. I couldn't have managed all of this without you, and this thing, I never expected it ..."

"Neither did I."

"But it's done. She's gone. I've closed down the house. It's time for me to go."

"I know."

"So what are we talking about?"

She looked down at the carpet. "I just thought I ... You know, when I came back here, I knew I'd never leave. I was hoping you might feel the same way. I thought I could be honest with you, that's all."

"To make me feel guilty?"

"No."

"What, then?"

She looked up at him. "Because you made me feel safe enough to say it. Because I think ..."

"What?"

"I think I love you."

"Love? This isn't love."

"It might be for me. You don't know."

"So, what, I'm supposed to say I love you back?"

"No."

"What am I supposed to say, then?" For the first time, there was bark in his words, aggressiveness, anger. It frightened her.

"Whatever you want to say."

"You're an emotional extortionist, you know that? We talked about this. We said it wouldn't be weird."

"It doesn't have to be weird."

"It's already weird!"

She stood and wrapped herself tight in the sheet that smelled like him, like her, like them. "I'm going to go. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything." He reached for her leg, but she backed up out of his reach. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry about your mom. She was a great lady. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

She turned and ran for the door in short steps. He watched her go.

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He groped in the dark, found the watch and pressed the light button on the side. Two twenty-one a.m. He pushed himself off the spread-out sleeping bag, his back scolding him. He rolled up the makeshift bed and tied it off. He slipped silently into a T-shirt and his jeans, patting the front pockets and finding the outline of his wallet and keys.

In the cab of the pickup, he fired up a Marlboro. He blew a cloud of smoke and watched through the rearview mirror as it diffused.

The engine turned over, and he set the truck in gear. At the bottom of the driveway, he turned right, under a street lamp spraying the asphalt in sullen yellow, and he remembered a night, thirty-odd years earlier, right around this time of year, when he and

the girl next door ran circles under that light, catching moths in a Mason jar. He remembered, and he wondered what home would look like tomorrow, when he got back to it.

