

The Way is Dark, the Road Long

by George LaCas

The day I got out of prison the sun was shining. You don't want to know what I did to get there, or what I did while I was inside, so we'll skip that part. Some things are better left unsaid. And it's best to look ahead.

So there I am standing across the highway from the state pen, waiting for the bus. Place looks a whole lot different from the outside. My shirt too tight across my chest. Who'd have figured me for a weight lifter. But the sun is shining, like I said, and a hot desert wind out of Mexico is breathing on me. Talking to me, almost.

Picture me: a white man with his hair buzzed down to a gray crust, white shirt open halfway down his chest, black jeans, flaking snakeskin boots, a man with no sunglasses to hide his eyes from the sun, noon and brutal, a man who carries nothing in his hands. Nothing. Not a fucking thing. A man who has every reason to raise his eyes to hellish heaven and twist up a rage-face at God, but doesn't.

The man is smiling. The man is me, and I'm smiling. Not because the bus is coming, warbling and floating like quicksilver dripping down the distant mountains, making a little pool where the brown land meets the white sky.

No sir. I'm smiling because I see the black car pull ahead of the bus, I imagine its throttle-roar before I hear it and then I do hear it, and then TJ's car is pounding the land and sky with the whole presence of it, 400 horsepower. And I'm grinning like a fool, watching, but what I'm thinking of is the horse of the Apocalypse. Whichever one

of those was black.

And TJ, the man himself, pulls into the breakdown lane, the bumper easing to a stop a foot from my belt buckle. My belt buckle is a pewter skull, and the Mexican who made it is dead. Don't ask me how I know. The bus is still five hundred yards away. I'm tempted to put my hand on the hood of the El Camino, TJ's tricked-out road monster, to watch my hand fry like bacon. And TJ, the man himself, watching me from behind the windshield, death head TJ, grinning like hell.

"Where we headed, Tommy?" I ask him when I climb in and pull the door shut.

But this just makes him grin all the wider. The sun flashes off his Ray-Bans, stolen no doubt.

"Same place we been headed, pardner," he tells me. His hand already on the shifter. His right boot goosing the gas, making a dinosaur roar-roar-ROAR. "This here is hell's own highway."

I didn't argue with that. I didn't say a word about staying straight, getting a job in my cousin's body shop. I didn't mention the sunshine, which glared down all around us. I didn't tell him I would wait for the bus.

I didn't say a fucking thing, because TJ knew I would never go straight. Because TJ owned the sunshine. And as for the bus, TJ dropped into gear and floored it, shooting out in front of the big Greyhound with less than a car length to spare. I knew he was gonna do it and still I almost pissed my pants.

"Same ole TJ," I say. I grab the Marlboros off the dash, push in the lighter.

"Always, my brother. Always."

=

The motel is out on Route 7. Good old Route 7, which I remember so well. I'd write a song about it, but songwriting is not my forte. Room 213, I saw when I opened the slip of paper, numbers which burned red and black with the car lighter held underneath. I held the bits of white paper and black ash out the window, and the burning desert wind, the demons in it, sucked it all away. It seemed a judgment.

And we are pulling into the lot. Not much live neon left in the sign. TJ is already talking low, nearly whispering:

"Gone to fuckin pot, this place."

"Yeah."

"I recall better times here."

Which makes me smile. I go to grab another smoke but TJ says Uh uh.

"No cherries," he murmurs. "This here's an all-black operation."

"I ain't even had a chance for a straight-time piss yet, and already this."

"You want to see about that gig doing needlepoint or whatever the fuck?" he hisses. He pulls the car to the edge of the lot, swings it around so it points back to the highway. "Cause I can do this alone."

"Who are you talking to, Tommy."

"That's what I thought." He didn't shut off the engine because he

already had. How long had we been coasting? Like the fucking Angel of Death, he is. We are. You can't fault the car.

=

Now picture the man in the room: just picture a fat slob in dirty skivvies and a wife beater. We see him as he flips channels, hunting porn. In the room, on the table, is what's left of the wholesaler's crack that he stole, his stem or his glass pipe, his smokes, his car keys, the paper napkins and empty box from his take-out taco dinner. If he ate any. But who really cares about that, right? Me and TJ are most surely not his mommy.

And watch as me and TJ walk right in, cause TJ already has a key, still sharp from the hardware store where the contractor had it made. And how the fat slob looks up with that look I've seen five hundred times: Who the fuck are you? combined with Oh shit I'm a dead man.

"You know what this is," TJ says, just like he's telling the time of day. Which he is, I guess, if you think about it.

"I'll pay you," the dead man says. "Got three grand in the toilet tank. Just take it and I never saw you. It's in a ziploc."

"No can do, pal," I say, as I close the door behind me.

Do you really want details? OK, then. TJ knocks the guy out with a forearm to the side of the head. I flip the stinky bastard over, push his face into his greasy pillow, and twist an arm behind his back, just in case he wakes up. Which he won't, but you never know.

And I look up at TJ. He's watching the damn TV. The sound is turned down, and I look at the screen to see what the hell he's looking at. Turns out it's a message about a new bible-on-DVD thing. The

ancient brownish pages are flipping. The last thing I see before I look away is Revelation.

I clear my throat.

And TJ reaches inside his leather jacket, which doesn't seem to make him sweat, even before the desert cold comes blowing down from the mountains. I've seen him wear it in 120 degree sun, his sunglasses flashing like chrome headlights, him grinning like hell. But right now he's coming out with a metal garrote in one hand. He holds it up, bounces the loop in the dull TV light.

I shrug.

And with the other hand he comes out with an ice pick, nothing fancy, just a crappy rusty one with a splintered wooden handle. He turns it back and forth in the metallic TV light.

I nod.

And, like the horseman who rides a black horse, TJ kneels on the fat slob's back, kneels with one knee, the icepick in his hand held loose and casual as a can opener.

"You want to hear something funny?" I ask him, and he looks at me.

"What."

"The horsemen, the four horsemen. And the black horse." The fat slob is coming to, turning beneath us, murmuring. I push his head down harder. "The rider of the black horse is the one with the scales, the measures."

TJ stares at me. He is watching my eyes dancing in the apocalyptic TV light.

"Not death, but weights and measures, like," I tell him.

And as he shoves the ice pick into the fat thief's medulla: "Same damn thing, ain't it?"

For a moment, over before it really begins, the man underneath me bucks like a stallion.

=

Route 7, black and blacker, rolls by beneath the El Camino. There's no sense of the car eating up the road. Rather, the dark road draws us down it.

Between us on the seat is a baggie, still wet, filled with rolled-up small bills. And a photograph, a Polaroid, of the dead man's face. I was kind of shocked when TJ pulled it out of his jacket and snapped the picture, because I thought those cameras were long gone.

"What's my cut?" I ask him, just to fill the darkness with a human sound. My voice sounds like a mistake that was never meant to be. My stomach is rumbling for a prison meal.

And I feel him look over at me. I feel his shadow turn toward my shadow. I can feel this.

"Same as always, brother," he says. I can hear him grinning like hell. "Fifty-fifty."

It's hours before we stop, and when we do it's still dark.

###

