

Donnie's end

by Mathew Paust

Using the GPS to retrace our route, Jamie drove with a steadfast determination that allowed no distractions, an exclusion to which I caught on quickly and cauterized the voicing of questions and comments that had seemed pressing. Both hands gripped the rubber-coated steering wheel, flexing her wrists and forearm tendons. Breathing hissed through teeth clamped on her lower lip. I started several times to speak, but the hiss cut me off before any words came out. I finally broke in and spoke when I saw the smoke plume, hovering like a stationary tornado in the breezeless air.

“Over there.” I pointed, trying to keep a rising frisson of alarm from my voice. She nodded once but nothing else changed—not our speed, the tension in her grip, clamped lip...I think maybe the hissing stopped, or I'd stopped noticing it. Or I'd switched to mouth breathing, too. Might even have been biting my own lip. All else eludes my recollection of our drawing near enough to see the dancing licks of orange through its veil of grey/white turbulence roiling upward into oily black.

We pulled onto the shoulder and parked behind a shiny red pickup that was parked behind a dark-colored car, an older mid-size model of something I didn't recognize. Three or four cars and pickups were parked across the highway. None of them appeared to be emergency vehicles. People were standing next to the road on our side, all staring at the burning car that lay on its top in a slight hollow about twenty yards from the roadway in tall weeds. I saw two men with small red fire extinguishers spraying whatever was in them at the inferno, but they were two far back to be effective. I rolled the window down and heard the flames boiling and popping, smelled the acrid odor of burning plastics and rubber. The car's paint had blackened already, obscuring any semblance of its original color. I swept my gaze along the area around the car and saw no one who might have gotten out of the wreck lying on the ground, perhaps covered with a coat or blanket.

I rolled up the window and, having heard nothing from her, turned around on the seat to look at Jamie. She was staring straight ahead, hands still locked on the wheel, and I realized the engine was running. "Are we..." As I hesitated to think of something to say, she shook her head and pulled back onto the highway. Her rigid silence continued until we were about a mile from the site. She spoke after fiddling with something on a small door panel and glancing across me a couple of times. Her voice was hard, the words clipped: "Can you see that truck behind us?"

I looked out my window. "Black pickup," I said, squinting to see it better in the side mirror.

"Keep your eye on it. It was parked across the road back there. We're going to lose it."

"Know who it is?"

She shook her head. "Not a clue, Blow, but it's no friend."

