

Picked Up

by Michael Barela

Tucker walked the long and lonely stretch of highway in front of him. The loneliness didn't matter; he had his own way of handling that feeling. The walking, however, was wearing away at his mind. How long had he been mindlessly shuffling one foot in front of the other? He supposed it didn't matter, eventually, somebody would offer him a ride. Tucker turned around, facing any oncoming vehicles and stuck out his thumb. He realized that he had a cardboard sign folded up in his back pocket. Tucker pulled it out and unfolding it while smiling, knowing that only illegible scribbling was "written" on it. It seemed to him that was just where he was going.

It didn't take long, only about ten minutes, before someone finally picked him up. A black car that looked like it shouldn't even be on the highway pulled off onto the shoulder. The driver's side window rolled down and an arm beckoned Tucker to come over. "What's your story, man," the driver shouted out to Tucker as he gently jogged his way to the passenger side. "My story is way too long. I'm Tucker, what's your story," he replied as he finally made his way into the vehicle. The driver took a deep breath and a long pause. "My name is Mike. As for my story, well, maybe you'll figure it out by the time we part ways."

"That's deep. I'll have to remember that one," Tucker said as he tickled the thought that their time to part ways might be sooner than Mike thought. "Yeah, thanks. I'm sure the next person to pick you up will get a kick out of that," Mike said as he began to cackle like a hyena. Tucker thought it a bit odd that Mike would be laughing as such, especially if he knew about his own intentions. Tucker joined Mike's laughter with his baritone barks, but he was laughing at the thought of Mike's laughter after Tucker shoved his knife into his throat, hopefully nicking something to make him gurgle in his joy.

"So where you heading, man," Mike asked cheerfully.

“Just about 20 miles up the road here; there should be another gas station. You can drop me off there.”

“Hell, man, I can get you there, pay for the gas, and bring you back to your car! I got nothing but time on my hands.” The offer was made.

“No, that's fine, Mark. I just need to get there and I can call my buddy to pick me up. I don't have a car broken down or anything.” After Tucker finished his sentence, a grim silence hung in the air.

“My name... Is Mike...”

“Alright, Mike, I got you. I won't mistake that again.” Tucker never imagined that he would ever apologize to anyone. It didn't matter; Tucker figured this awkward situation would end soon enough. Mike finally broke the thickening silence, “Tucker, right? You ever think about how fragile humans are? I mean, think about it for a little.” He didn't sincerely offer him any time to really think about it. “Shit, we're made out of flesh. Sure, it's durable and all of that, true. But have you ever seen someone's face smashed in by a piece of *wood?!'*” This time Mike did offer a pause, which Tucker recognized, “No, I guess I haven't.” He lied. “Well, it's just wood, and it can leave an ugly mark. Furthermore, wood can be easily broken down by metal. Well, I guess blunt metal works too, but I'm talking about sharpened metal; like an axe. You ever seen anyone get hit by a *fucking axe, man?!'*”

Tucker's forehead began to break into a fine mist of sweat; Mike was starting to sound like Tucker did right before he took someone's life. “No, I guess I haven't.” This time he didn't lie. “Well, it leaves a *fucking mess*, TUCKER. A fucking mess that takes FOR-GODDAMN-EVER to clean up, TUCKER. A terrible fucking mess. There's so much fucking blood spurting out of that fucker's throat! JESUS CHRIST, TUCKER, IT WAS LIKE A FUCKING BAPTISM!” Mike reached across the seat and grabbed Tucker by his shirt collar. “You wanna know what I did in that fountain, *Tucker*,” he asked quietly and rhetorically, “I... fucking... *drank...*” Tucker began to think he was stuck with someone more psychotic than himself. “I've been

sober for *five GODDAMN years*, TUCKER! But that metallic blood tasted like it needed a tequila chaser, *GODDAMNIT!*"

Mike began to shake Tucker violently. Tucker figured it was time to put an end to this nonsense, even if it meant killing this psycho sooner than he wanted to. Tucker started to reach down into his pocket. Mike let go of Tucker's shirt, pressed his forearm against Tucker's throat, and pulled the steering wheel sharply to the right, slamming the car against the barricades placed there in case of falling boulders.

"Tucker, GODDAMNIT! You think I'm a goddamn *idiot*? I know what the fuck you're trying to do. I hope you can see what the fuck *I'm* doing! YOU NEED TO LEARN SOME SHIT!" Mike shouted over the horrible sound of the concrete scraping against metal and the sound of Tucker's skull making a spider-web break in the window.

Tucker, being dazed by all of this happening so suddenly, did not notice Mike pull Tucker's knife out of his hands. Mike, seeming to not care about where the car was pointed, examined the switchblade with shock. "Tucker... Tucker... Mother... Fucker..." Mike began to rant in a sing-songy voice, "you really think that this thing would have killed me? Check this out," Mike popped out the blade, made sure it was locked into place, and slammed it with all his strength into Tucker's right arm. Tucker's vision went blank with white pain and could only howl in agony.

"*HA!* That fucker made it through the muscle, right?" Mike shrieked out in sadistic ecstasy. Tucker could only continue screaming in pain. Obviously not caring about the car, Mike began to swerve as he began to give the knife a twist here and there along with a push and a pull to make sure that Tucker's arm was pinned to his seat. "You see, I had some wood placed in that seat not too long ago, *Tucker*. I'm surprised you haven't said anything about how uncomfortable that seat is. Good thing your arms are so small, too! Or else that would just be in your arm; but it looks pretty well deep in there. I don't think you'll want to touch that, either, buddy."

Tucker's howls subsided and gave way to frightened sobs. In all his time prowling the busy highways, he never imagined he could meet someone as insane as this guy. With his left arm, Tucker frantically pawed at the door handle. "Are you really that *stupid*, Tucker?" Mike's voice didn't sound calm as much as it sounded annoyed and deranged. "I fixed those handles. All of them, actually; even *my own* door! They can only be opened from the outside! The best way in and out of the car is to jump in and out of the window, isn't that just *awesome*?" Mike howled out more laughter and Tucker felt his nerves unravel even more. For the first time since he sat in the car, he looked at the speedometer. Mike was pushing the engine to its limit, maintaining a steady one-hundred-twenty-seven miles per hour. "*Oh!* Noticing the speed? Or did you just notice all of this blow that *you* fucked up by spilling all of *your FUCKING BLOOD?!*" Mike picked up the CD case that had remained surprisingly still during the whole fiasco, brought it up to his face, and inhaled all that he could. "*You fucked it up!* Goddamnit, I *hate* it when people fuck with my blow, *Tucker.*"

Tucker hardly noticed this blatant disregard for human life and began to worry about his own life for once. Since as far as he could remember, Tucker was thrusting his knife into peoples' throats, even while they were driving, thinking he didn't care which one of them died. Now he was beginning to realize that he was just a predator, killing the weaker. Now he realized that he was in the presence of a wilder predator and fighting wasn't much of an option.

"You know what this piece of shit car *doesn't* have, Tucker?" Mike asked. There was another long pause. "Well? *Tucker*, I'm talking to you. It's rude not to answer..." "NO! I DON'T KNOW!" Tucker sobbed out. "Company," Mike replied.

Mike slammed on the brakes and the knife lodged in Tuckers arm was flung loose out onto the floor well of the car. Without missing a beat, Tucker reached down and grabbed the knife, "Let me out of this bitch! You're a fucking *psycho!*" Mike began to cackle his hyena laughter again, "I told you, man, the door can open from the outside. It's not as cool as jumping out of the window, but it works. But..."

Mike never finished his sentence, just resumed his cackling, slamming his fists against the steering wheel in what appeared to be a mixture of rage and insane humor.

Tucker didn't want to spend any more time with this lunatic, so ignoring the throbbing pain in his right arm, Tucker turned his body to roll down the window and reach out to open the door and run away. In the panic Tucker couldn't hear the horn blowing over Mike's howling laughter, and the blinding pain from where his own blade was lodged in his arm was as blinding as the approaching headlights. The only thing that Tucker did notice was the heavy vibrations coming from beneath the car before there was nothing.

