

I See Your Face Before Me

by Michael K. White

The summer was announcing itself in thick waves of heat that rolled like a slow motion hurricane inside Mark Keeler's 1971 Mercury Montego. The car baked in a fragrance of motor oil, sweat and rotting vinyl. The Montego was noisy and leaky, but it was a powerful car, capable of mighty acceleration when all its cylinders were hitting properly. It had almost three hundred thousand miles on it, most of them Mark put on by driving back and forth to work every night. But no more. Now there was no longer any work for him. Well, it would save wear and tear on the car.

Its most recent expense was a dead battery. The previous battery had kept the Montego going for twelve years, surely a record in the car battery annals, but it meant nothing to Mark who had to cough up a hundred and thirty bucks for a replacement just when his expensive blood thinning medication was running low.

Mark decided it was hot enough to try and pry the side window down. It had long ago slipped its groove and raising and lowering it took a supreme effort on Mark's part. Indeed, it was this very act that had precipitated his heart scare; a tugging, ominous pain in his chest as he strained to lift the glass from the small slot back into place. Seven hundred thousand dollars and a year later here he was, driving from the bank with his last paycheck, almost two thousand dollars, all in cash on the seat beside him.

He was heading for Lasso Liquors, where he intended to buy a case of Coors beer. He had decided to drink the whole case in one night and then kill himself. He hadn't decided how to do it yet. He hoped the beer would give him inspiration. He would arrange himself among his records, the only things he truly loved, even

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though he had never listened to any of them. That was beside the point.

Mark felt a tremendous sense of relief. He felt light and happy in a way he had not felt since he was a boy. He could almost taste the cold beer going gloriously down his throat. It was such a hot day, but tonight it would be cool. Maybe the crickets would come out early this year. He was in no hurry. Two thousand dollars could last him a while. Then he could kill himself. Plenty of time for that and

There was a person, a woman in a too short dress with dangly earrings leaning into his newly opened window. He had stopped at a red light and all of a sudden there she was sticking her head all the way into his car, pressing her face right up against his. He was shocked and scared and he punched the gas then the brake causing the old Montego to lurch. It threw the woman off balance and she fell to the street, flat on her ass. Mark was mortified and his heart pounded in his chest. He put his hand over his breast bone and could feel it hammering. Oh please stop he begged his heart. Please stop beating so fast. I don't want to die..

"Mother fucker!" The woman spat, standing up and thrusting her head back into the side window and into Mark's face. He could smell her alcohol breath and the cigarette smoke in her hair. She was a skinny woman, painfully so, and her face was spackled with industrial strength make up. She almost looked like a kabuki woman or an auguste clown, except her eyes were redder than her lips. She was about 40 or maybe 70, it was impossible to tell. She held a tall golden can of Budweiser in her hand.

"Cocksucker! Whaddya tryin to do kill me? You fuckin jerk! Lissen honey, I won't have to sue your sorry ass if you can gimme a ride to Roasty's. I gotta meet some people there an.." She trailed off when she saw the crazy fan of bills on the seat beside Mark, who gaped at her. He looked down at his money and back at her. She was gone.

He instinctively grabbed at the money when the passenger door jerked open and the woman plopped in on the seat. There were still

a few bills left under her skinny ass. Mark held the rest tightly in his fist.

"It's jest up the street a ways honey. Don't you know Roasty's? They got a five dolla pitcher of beer night. Go on." Mark stuffed the bills into his shirt pocket and looked again at where the woman was sitting, wondering how much of his money was under her ass. She squirmed and waved a bony finger in his face.

"Don you be gettin no ideas tiger man! Keep you eyes on the road!" Mark drove through the intersection, his mind was racing.

"I was just going for some beer myself," He said and his voice sounded thin and dry. "It's such a hot day and all.." He could smell her sour sweat through the layer of sickly sweet perfume that covered her like a caul. He eyed the tall golden can of Budweiser between her legs. She smiled and handed him the can. He drank greedily from it. The beer was lukewarm and he could taste her spit around the rim. He stopped at another red light.

"Why don you come to Roasty's with me. You can buy me a drink. Who knows you might get lucky. If I could just find some way to pay my rent. You wanna buy me a beer honey? You drank all of mine. It's only fair."

"Sure. Sure." Mark said. The beer had transformed him. He felt handsome and confident. And she looked younger, less mangy. And then he felt her bony hand on his crotch. She was squeezing and rubbing him like she was kneading dough.

"I jes need to find a way to pay my rent honey. I need to make some money fast. How bout I give you a nice blow job for twenty bucks."

She rubbed him harder and bent down when he exploded in his pants. A car horn honked behind him. The light had turned green. He drove on, the Montego growling. The woman sat up, cackling like an old fashioned witch. Mark noticed she was missing a few teeth. Then she stopped and grew very serious. "Okay," she said in a no nonsense voice. "I'll take five then. For the hand job."

Mark stopped at another red light. He looked down to the stain on his pants. It looked like a map of America. All at once Mark felt hopeful.

"Are you married?" he asked the woman.

