

She said, "The last highway is only as far away as you are from yourself."

-Over the Rhine "Jesus in New Orleans"

1. The First Joint

I woke up on my living room floor, lying on my back. I felt groggy, hungover. I couldn't remember falling asleep, or how long I'd been there.

My apartment was dark, with every light off. It was really quiet and my body had this weird static-y feel to it, caught in that thin twilight between asleep and awake.

All I knew was this: I needed to get somewhere else, and fast.

I got up off the floor, went out the door and down the stairs to the parking lot.

I went to my car— a 2014 Chevy Cruz, tungsten black, parked in a spot along the sidewalk. It was the only car in the parking lot. I hadn't seen it since I'd traded it in back in 2022. That was weird, but I didn't think about it just then.

It was freezing out, and snowing so hard I couldn't see past the end of the parking lot. Everything was white and cold and dead. But it hadn't been winter when I'd gone to sleep, whenever that was. I couldn't remember exactly what season it was, but it I knew it wasn't winter. I was dressed in just a white undershirt, a flannel button-up and jeans. The cold hit me like a wall.

As I got closer to my car, I realized there was someone in the back seat.

No, not just someone.

Two someones.

Two people.

Two guys.

Just sitting there.

As I got closer, the rear driver side window slid down, even though the car clearly wasn't running. Behind the window was a guy with coffee-colored skin and the whitest teeth I'd ever seen. He grinned out at me like a Persian film producer. Snowflakes caught in his gelled black hair.

"Door's open," he said.

I opened the driver door and got into the driver's seat, shivering helplessly, my jeans frozen against my legs. I craned my neck and examined my backseat intruders.

They were two Middle Eastern men who looked to be in their mid-forties, both swarthy and broad-shouldered and thick-necked, going gray in a classy manner. The one on the driver's side had styled hair and small gold earrings in both ears. He wore a denim vest over a white button-up shirt, opened at the top to reveal a gold chain on a broad, hairy chest.

The one on the passenger side was a veritable hulk, crammed into the backseat like a clown in a cartoon. He was lighter-skinned and wore small circular sunglasses, and he was dressed in a long black coat and a wide-brimmed hat like the kind Amish guys wear. A thin goatee circled his pursed lips. Beneath his massive hat, his head was shaved. He stared straight ahead, not speaking.

"Who are you?" I asked. "How'd you get in my old car?"

"We're everywhere, son," answered the first guy. He spoke in a folksy American accent, all country fences and rolling hills and soft sunsets. "You know who we are?"

"No," I said.

"I'm The Devil, and this," —he gestured at his companion— "...is Death. He don't talk much."

"You're The Devil?"

"Yessir. Got a lot of names, but you'd know me as The Devil."

I rubbed my eyes. I couldn't remember where I'd been a few minutes ago or how I'd gotten to my car. I still had that instinctual urge to just *go home*. I felt like something really bad would happen to me if I didn't get moving.

"You've heard of us," said the Devil. "Why don't you take a look in your little kiddie Bible?"

He nodded at the front passenger seat. Sitting on it was a weathered Catholic Children's Bible, bound in royal red leather with golden embroidery.

It was mine. I hadn't seen it since I was a kid.

"Take a look-see," said the guy claiming to be The Devil.

The guy called Death was staring straight ahead into his round sunglasses, his face pale and expressionless.

His lips moved.

"Gone..."

He spoke in a low rumble of a voice. He had an accent, too, the word coming out in a thick Southern drawl.

Gaww-nnn...

I picked up the children's Bible. Inside, stories of The Old and New Testament were told in graphic detail, accompanied by colorful photo-realistic illustrations. I'd received the Bible for my first Communion. I'd only ever looked through it a couple times. I was raised Catholic—sort of— but I've never been religious.

To my great surprise, the illustrations did indeed now include my backseat intruders. They were in the background of every picture after Genesis—The Devil grinning, Death towering. There they were with Daniel in the lion's den, with Samson as he

tore down the temple, with Moses as he parted the Red Sea, and with Jesus as he was nailed to the cross.

I looked back at them. The one who called himself The Devil was grinning at me in a really unpleasant way. It's cliché, but he was grinning like a fox, one that's cornered a rabbit. It was starting to piss me off.

"Gawnnn..." said Death again.

"Look, I have to get home," I told them, groggy as fuck. I really, really couldn't remember how I'd gotten down here. This shitty dream.

"Well, we need you to help us out, Johnny," said the Devil.

"Yeah, but I have to get home, though."

"There are only two forces in the world, son. Creation and destruction. Can you guess which of those is my business?"

I looked down at my Bible, which was open to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. There was Lot fleeing the flaming cities, his wife turned into a pillar of salt. The expressions on Lot and his daughters' faces were probably supposed to convey some furious spiritual devotion, but to me they'd always just looked insane. The Devil and Death were visible down the hill, toward where the cities burned.

"Destruction?"

"That's right," said the Devil. "Johnny, when they see the vengeance of the Almighty on your face, they will tremble before you. All with one word— arise."

"Gone..." said Death.

A strange alarm pulsed in my head. Anxiety prickling, threatening to take me down to the abyss. I really, really, really couldn't remember where I was coming from, why I'd come down here, how I'd gotten to my car. There was some weird wall in my awareness that only extended to the last few minutes and nowhere else. I was high and dreaming and hungover all at once.

"I'm sorry, but I have to get home," I said.

The Devil stopped grinning.

"Look, son, why don't you start up the car, cause it's fuckin' freezing."

He was right. My entire body seemed to be clenching in on itself. I was hunched over, my shoulders tightened and my hands crammed between my legs.

The key was already in the ignition. I turned it.

The sound of the engine was comforting, the sound of progress. The sound of going home.

That's all I could think about— going home. Wherever that was. I wanted to get on the road. Home was down the road. I wasn't looking forward to driving through all this snow, but I knew I could do it if I had to. I'd driven through worse.

"There we go," said the Devil. "Crank that heat. It's good to be warm. Makes you appreciate the simple things."

I did so, turning the fan knob all the way to the right. The air was instantly hot, no engine warm-up needed.

"What's going on?" I asked over the roar of the vents, that vague feeling of inner dread threatening to expand inside me.

"What happened? Why can't I remember anything?"

"Well, that's cause you've just died, Johnny," said the Devil.

This news should've floored me. Instant, eternal panic attack. But it didn't. Instead, I was just confused.

"What?"

"You heard me."

"...I died?"

"That's what I said."

"But I'm still here."

"You sure are."

"But—"

"I know how you're feeling, son. You want to get back to that nice, relaxed, baseline mental state you little monkeys enjoy. So fucking listen. Cause we got something for you to do."

"What is it?"

"Gone..." said Death.

"Here," said the Devil. "All you need to know is on this."

He pulled out an old burned CD from his vest pocket and handed it to me.

I hadn't seen or held one of these things since I was a kid. It was one of those nondescript ones— just a blank, silver disc. A flat moon, my friend Dmitri used to call them.

The word "WRATH" was written in black marker on the CD's label.

"Some souls are simply beyond saving," said the Devil. "And they don't know it till it's too late."

"I have to get home..." I said quietly, looking down at the CD.

"Have a listen. It'll fill you in. We'll meet you when the first task is completed. You can put the CD in the organizer when you're done."

The Devil gestured and I looked at my passenger visor, flipped it open. There was a black CD holder velcro'd around it. Seven empty slots.

"Yeah, but how do I get home?" I asked. The CD's plastic edges felt sharp against my cold-sensitive fingers. The vents roared hot air.

"Just listen to the goddamn CD, son," said the Devil. "We got an eternity to run here."

The cold whooshed in as the two of them opened their doors at the same time. The rear suspension groaned as they got out.

The doors slammed and they were instantly gone (*gawwnn...*). The wind howled and the snow flew sideways.

I put my hands in front of the vents, shivering. My fingers felt like carrots in a crisper. The headlights spilled onto the parking lot, the snow shifting like bedsheets.

I put the CD in the slit. Turned up the volume. I couldn't remember the last time I'd listened to a CD mix, let alone burned one. Over a decade. Everything since 2014 had been streaming— first Pandora, then Apple Music.

A voice came out of the car's speakers.

I listened to the voice until the snow tapered off and the clouds parted and the world around me was revealed.

My usual surroundings— the old folks' home and the church across the street, every oak and willow tree, Pontiac Trail to the north, the other apartment buildings— were not there. They were all gone. My apartment building was gone. Despite the merciless blizzard that had just ended, there was absolutely no snow on the ground.

Now, the parking lot was alongside a broad four-lane highway that stretched off to both horizons.

The highway was pure black asphalt with pristine gravel shoulders. No marks, no painted lines, no road signs that I could see. It cut through vast Midwestern prairie. Grassland, farmland, occasional groves of trees. Hills rose in the distance. There were no signs of humanity— no houses or barns or fences or other cars.

The clouds surfed overhead, racing each other. Every now and then a glint of pure white would break through— beautiful, piercing shafts of light, momentary pillars between heaven and earth. They shifted in and out, a ballet of mirror illusions.

I turned on the radio, instinctively. There was only one channel. No matter where I turned the dial, there were no other stations. Just static.

The one station was playing Tom Petty. I knew the song. It's called You Don't Know How It Feels. Acoustic guitar, harmonica, really basic 4/4 drum beat.

This didn't please me. I fucking hate adult contemporary, especially anything pre-2000s. It's not my music.

But this particular song made me think of something right away. The chorus talks about "rolling another joint".

When I was a kid and my dad would play this song in the car or in the garage or whatever, I didn't know what a joint was in the drug sense. But Dad would bring out that phrase when he wanted to wrap something up.

"Let's roll another joint, Johnny-child," he'd say.

So for the first decade of my life or so, I only knew the term "joint" as "a random place,"— usually a bar or a hangout spot. So "roll another joint," to Johnny-child meant, "Let's go from one place to the next. Our work here is done, so let's get in the car and roll on down to the next joint."

I listened to Tom's pinched, distinctive vocals and the plaintive harmonica for a few seconds, then shut the radio off and put the car in drive. The heat from the vents had killed the cold in my hands, turning my fingers soft and pink again. I put them on the cold steering wheel, my foot on the brake.

It was time to go home.