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No Middle Ground

JL Rehman



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FILE: Harley.DOC:

He always loved the way the streets smelled at night after a rain. Traffic had thinned out leaving those with questionable destinations locked securely behind glass and late night radio stations. Harley pulled into a Handy Shop, walked in, and drifted up and down the aisles to placate the insomnia. His intention was to buy a pack of cigarettes and leave, but loneliness led him to the magazine rack of word search and crossword puzzles, and even now, post coital with a thirteen year old in the front seat of his Taurus, he felt empty and embittered. In his mind, Jerry stood by his side thumbing through computer magazines. Harley never understood most of what Jerry said about computers. Jerry didn't seem to mind either. Just the fact he was being listened to seemed to satisfy him. Harley paid for the cigarettes and the computer magazine and left.

Harley drove through the night, looking over at the passenger seat as if Jerry was explaining the difference between memory and space on a hard drive. Harley got lost on space verse RAM, and more than once. That was the memory Harley relived now.

The Taurus pulled discreetly along a side street two blocks from the Liddell's residence. He exited the vehicle and within two minutes was at the Liddell's back door under a half moon. His hand swept down the door facing, paused to debate the risk, and pulled the cigarette from his mouth to grind it in the grass. He picked up a ceramic pot next to the door holding a dying geranium, took the house key that lay between the pot and the saucer, and let himself in.

The laundry room smelled of fabric softener and the faint remains of tonight's pot roast. Vivid memories surfaced, the way the walls felt around him and the scent of the lives that occupied it—the deceitful conversations and lies.

His hand found the smooth enamel finish of the washing machine and caught the roughness of the wicker

laundry basket. He dipped his fingers into the folded clothes, pulled them to his nose and inhaled. The central air switched on, blowing warm air in his face, followed by cool house breath. He stepped into the hall that led to the living room and stopped. Heaviness settled around his shoulders, spiteful and overburdened. As he moved through the living room, George's loud, erratic snoring broke the silence.

He stood at George and Mattie's open bedroom door, listening to their deep sleep clustered in middle class dreams. Mattie's lotions and bath scents drifted under his nose and were sucked into the wall intake behind the door as the air handler droned above.

Each slept alone as if on alien territory, George on the left by the door and Mattie on the right, each on the edge, a wasteland in the middle. The bed had become a guarded boarder zone of foreign occupation, separated by a demilitarized zone so each could claim captured rest. Intimacy was vacant and hostile. Harley knew it was gone, sensed it shortly after he made himself comfortable within the walls. Although his presence wasn't responsible for the slow decay, it certainly produced the infection harbored in it now.

Stepping into the room, Harley considered their history together, their connection through Jerry, felt entitled to his share of Jerry's life; and hated her. He ran his finger across the sheet draped over her hips, along the curvature of her waist, slowed at her breast and lingered there. Circling it several times, he continued to her shoulder and settled on her neck, felt her pulse under his index finger, warm and strong. Mattie stirred, speaking disjointed words and sighed. He placed his finger on her lips, tracing its outline, "shh."

A photograph on the nightstand of Mattie holding Jerry as an infant glowed in the light of the clock. Harley picked it up, opened a dresser drawer in front of the window and laid it down on top of Mattie's underwear.

He peered through the blinds, watching the wind shove the shrubbery around, and contemplated murdering them both. He could slit their throats and wait for them to die. Harley looked over his shoulder as they slept and

debated the pros and cons of such an action. Just take Jerry and run. Fantasizing the act was a part-time hobby he exercised whenever the mood hit him. He might get the opportunity later, but for now he had to restrict himself to simply refining the details for a smooth execution in the future.

Harley pulled the bedroom door closed and worked his way down to the end of the hall in the dark. Knowing Jerry was so close raised the flesh on his arms, the feeling of lust so high, his left hand trembled. The slow rise and fall of Jerry's breathing took Harley back in time, the sessions of instruction when he had Jerry convinced their behavior was normal and for them alone, and thought if it weren't for the discovery, they might still be engaged in stolen hours.

Harley's hand glided along the top of the dresser settling on a small hot rod car by a soccer trophy. The die cast metal warmed as it rolled around in his hand. He had given it to Jerry the second time they had met; when Harley made the decision Jerry would be the one. He thought George and Mattie must not have known it was from him because they surely would have thrown it out. Jerry had kept it, left it out in plain sight, and Harley wondered if it reminded him of their time together.

Jerry whined in his sleep. Harley's hunger for him sparked and ignited in the dark. Jerry flipped over in his sleep and his pillow fell to the floor. Harley picked it up and held it to his chest while watching him sleep. What if Jerry could see him standing in the dark, would he yell out? It was too dark to see his face in the shadows cast by the Camphor tree outside the window; only chance glances visible when the wind caught the branches to allow the streetlight in.

Jerry's dreams seemed lonely and with little resolution. His small mouth formed words but carefully restrained them, faint whispers catching Harley's ear as an invitation to come closer. Clutching the pillow, Harley sat down on the edge of the bed. Jerry's warmth radiated through the sheet and began to invite him closer until Harley's face was next to Jerry's head. His hair tickled Harley's nose, continued to invite him without permission.

For well over an hour Harley just sat watching Jerry in the dark.

At dawn, Harley carefully placed the pillow back under Jerry's head and went to the computer and booted it up. Pale blue light filled the room as he typed. *Hey bud, miss you. You're beautiful when you sleep, like an Angel. Think about you all the time.*

Harley slipped out of the Liddell house unseen and drove home with the window down. Fresh new morning air is the best, he thought.