



## SUCHIN'S ESCAPE





### Suchin's Escape

Antoine lit a cigarette with the lighter from the dash of the twenty-seven year-old 1976 Lincoln Continental and leaned forward with both forearms on the steering wheel. Harry beat out a rhythm on the dash with both hands—BOOM chee CHEE—*di di* BOOM; and he sang a song of lost love. Antoine liked the tune, liked the way his cousin could make it flow.

Antoine watched the green two-story frame house across the street from where they were parked on a side street in Gretna. The image of the thin child Suchin, the eleven year old Chinese girl, materialized in the dark narrow alley between the houses, the blurred outline of a man blocking the alley behind her. She was naked except for a pair of patent leather Mary Janes. She stopped before stepping into the glint of the morning sun, and slid a lace/trimmed white dress over her head, pushing her arms out the sleeve holes. She smoothed the fabric in front with both hands and the hem fell to her ankles.

“She’s done,” Antoine said. Harry stopped his rhythm and got out of the car. He met the girl still in the shadows, grabbed her arm, and brought her quickly to the car, her moving feet barely touching the ground. Harry opened the back door and shoved her into the back seat.

“Don’t push me.” Suchin said, kicking out, her shoe heel glancing off Harry’s arm.

The girl made money and this guy in the shadows was one of her many repeats. But Antoine didn't trust her. Something about the way her eyes held his, hard and cold in their darkness, and the way she never flinched if he had to cuff her.

"Tape her," he said. "I got a bad feeling."

"We ain't going that far," Harry said.

See! Even Harry was ornery now, started about the time this girl arrived in a shipment of twelve. Strange too, because the kid was all girl—not anything womanly—like a twig in a forest of leafy branches.

"That Paradise Motel near the airport," Antoine said.

"Tape hurt," said Suchin.

That proved it. Pure trouble . . . the way she'd just butt in like she belonged.

"Ride with her then," he said to Harry.

Harry shoved Suchin over to one side on the back seat to make room. He slammed the back door as Antoine cranked the motor.

"But don't put them locks down," Harry said.

Harry was a goddamn two year-old trapped in the body of King Kong sometimes. Antoine undid the childproof locks on the back doors.

"Don't like the door locked," Harry said feeling foolish when the fear of being closed in grabbed him.

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The Lincoln Continental rolled down the expressway. Antoine kept in the right lane, five miles an hour below the speed limit. Harry's big head blocked half his view out

the rear view mirror. He checked the side mirrors for cops. He was clean but Harry had a prior for assault with a parole violation.

The kid wasn't in the mirror. He glanced back over his right shoulder. Nothing. She was either lying down or she'd slipped over next to the door. He reached for a crumpled cigarette pack wedged between the windshield and the dash, squeezed out the end of the last cigarette that he extracted with tight lips, and lit up.

The silence from the back seat mounted.

Then the tap . . . tap . . . tap . . . tap. The kid was beating her shoe against the doorframe, grooving on the beat like a pro, the pulse asking for more. Sure enough, Harry's big hands clapped soft but firm with emphasis on the late off beats. Tap tap CLAP tap CLAP tap CLAP CLAP.

Without thinking Antoine beat his thumb against the steering wheel. He tucked the Lincoln in behind a bakery truck.

Harry started singing, his voice filling up the car, and the kid making ooou-ooous like a real backup.

"It's down" tap tap

"In Pascagoula" tap tap

"Where the women" tap tap

"Do the hoola" tap tap

"And the men" tap tap

"They the ones" tap tap.

"They the ones, whoooo----ooooooooooooo"

"Wicky . . . wicky . . . whacky—whacky—woo."

For a few bars Harry and Suchin clapped and tapped almost perfectly in their shared drive. Then they shifted in unison to a slower groove, four to the bar.

Harry's voice fell off a minor third.

"Ohhhh, ohhhh," he wailed.

"Ouuuuu, ouuuuu" the kid chimed in,

"It's my woman, . . ."ohhh, yeah,"

"That cheating woman," . . .

"ouuu, ouuu,"

"Its my woman," "ohhh, yeah,"

"That done me wrong." Harry finished.

"Soooo wrong," the kid added. "Ouuuuu . . ."

Harry chuckled.

Then, smooth as a river running, the two of them were back working on and off the beat, setting up for another verse.

Goddamn her. She could work Harry like a dog jumping through hoops.

"Tolls," he said.

Harry shoved Suchin down in the foot well to hide her as Antoine held bills out to the collector. "Be quiet," he said. The engine strained when the Lincoln started up the bridge incline over the Mississippi. Two minutes later the car slowed in traffic. Suchin stiffened, her teeth clenched.

She yanked the door handle, shoved the door open, rolled out headfirst flipping on her back. In seconds she was up running toward the guardrail, the river, so much bigger than the stream that ran near her village in China. Horns blared. Fast cars moved in the

opposite direction. Harry yelled behind her. How close was he? A sports car hit her, throwing her up on the hood, screeching to a stop. The girders above her weaved like dragons' tails.

Harry grabbed her before she slid off to the pavement, held her so close his hot breath smothered her face. Her leg began to throb, she could barely see out one eye, but her heart squeezed fast and strong.

“Shouldn't done that,” Harry whispered to her. “Antoine going to kill you.”

The sports car guy came running up screaming about his innocence. With one arm still holding Suchin, Harry picked him up and threw him against the side of the car so hard his head flew back on the roll bar with a crunch. Harry grunted satisfaction as the guy slumped half conscious.

Suchin moaned when Harry put her in the car.

“Stay with her,” Antoine said. He blew the horn, waved at people. He had to get moving before any cops came. He'd have to switch the plates again, find something in the Marriott parking garage from Ohio or Indiana this time. In a couple minutes they were at the exit ramp. He was out of cigarettes.

The kid trembled, her head in Harry's hands, her shoulders on his thigh, her legs out on the seat.

“She breathing?” Antoine asked into the back seat.

“Blood coming out her mouth.” A trickle of dark red mixed with spit-foam dripped on Harry's thigh. “Her leg getting big,” he said.

Antoine caught a red light. He looked back. The girl's chest moved with quick in and outs. Her dress was torn. Her upper leg a sick purple. No one would

pay for sex with a bleeding, moaning kid. He hated to stiff the guy on Airline Highway but he headed for Claiborne to get on the I-10.

“She bad,” Harry said, “She real bad.”

Suchin heard Harry’s words as if the volume had been turned to maximum in a set of headphones. She did not think about dying and she wondered if she could run with her leg hurting.

She coughed.

“What was that?” Antoine said.

Harry saw a bloody tooth on the seat. “She bad,” he repeated.

Well, shit. Antoine was going as fast as he could without putting them behind bars.

“Her eye look crooked,” Harry said like he blamed Antoine.

It was Harry’s fault she got out. No locks! Harry had jumped at the click of a deadbolt sliding home since he was in Angola for two years five months. Like he caught a phobia and now we can’t lock the back doors.

Antoine wasn’t being unreasonable. Okay. He didn’t like kids. But he wasn’t a monster. And he never let a guy down. Or a kid, for that matter. He was taking her to the doc, for Christ sake. How many guys would do that? “How many?” he said out loud.

“What you say?” Harry said.

But he didn’t explain. Harry was slow to understand sometimes. And too soft to keep rules.

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Antoine pulled into a mall and parked. Harry followed him carrying the kid through the door, between a liquor store and a Goodwill clothing outlet, marked in faded yellow letters:

OFFICE HOURS 10-2

M,W,Th

The doc sat alone at a desk in a single room. Harry laid Suchin on a bare examining table with metal stirrups on one end.

“That’s repulsive,” the doc said swiveling back and forth in his chair, his short-sleeved pale tan shirt with yellow brush-like swirl patterns unbuttoned halfway down the slope of his hairy chest. He was a hundred pounds overweight.

“Hit by a car.”

“Take her to Charity.”

“She’s illegal.”

“I don’t do trauma.”

Suchin’s leg spasmed for a few seconds.

“The big man pays you damn good,” Antoine said. “Too much.”

“Not for this.” The doc belched; Antoine was close enough to whiff the scent of decayed oranges and cheap booze--like the man’s insides needed to be flushed down a toilet.

The doc stood up. He took a wooden tongue blade from his shirt pocket. He lifted the kid’s dress fabric with the blade careful not to touch anything bloody. Still with the tongue blade, he pushed up a swollen eyelid and stared at a pupil.

“She’ll live.”

“Aren’t you going to x-ray or something?”

“Do you see an x-ray machine?”

“She could die.”

“She isn’t going to die!” he said.

The doc picked up a wallet off his desk and left through a back door that went straight to a service alley. “Office is closed,” he said as he slammed the door shut.

Antoine pointed for Harry to get the kid.

“Where we going?”

“Auntie’s,” Antoine said. “She’ll do something.”

Suchin felt the big arms cradling her again, her mind clear. Her stomach churned. Her tongue probed the sore little craters where her teeth were gone. Her leg ached but she thought she could walk if she had to. With her non-blurred eye she searched from habit for locks on the doors. Then, when the sunlight glared on her, she squeezed her good eye closed and went limp to let Harry think her mind had shut down her body for a while.

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The Lincoln got to Auntie’s in Plaquemine Parrish just before five, a rooster tail of almost white dust pluming up behind that monster car. Auntie went downstairs out of the farmhouse, stood there waiting as they drove up, her arms crossed. She was heavy, big boned, and barren; her blood Indian, Creole, and Black, and every corpuscle heavy with this love-hate feeling for kids. It was a mystery why she took care of them at all after being in the trade for thirty years.

“You whack this one?” Auntie said to Antoine as Harry worked at getting Suchin out of the car so she didn’t hurt.

“Watch your mouth,” Antoine said.

Auntie’s hands probed Suchin’s thigh while she was still in Harry’s arms. Suchin cried out. She pushed on Suchin’s belly. Suchin moaned. She looked under Suchin’s swollen eyelid. Suchin’s eye was seeing well now and she locked on Auntie’s gaze. Auntie frowned and turned away.

“Put her to the right of the door in the bedroom,” Auntie said to Harry and pulled Antoine’s shirt to move him a few feet so no one could hear.

“Cash up front.” she said.

“She’s big money. Next to top in the convention trade. She good for it. We ain’t got cash.”

“Out of where?” Auntie asked.

“Mere Bull. In Kenner.”

“Tell Mere Bull she to bring that cash down here personal.”

“You got my word,” Antoine said sincerely.

“Ain’t that a lot of slippery shit?”

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Suchin lay on her back on a cot with no mattress. The only window had a yellow shade pulled down and the dim light from the filtered sun wasn’t strong enough to define the floral details on the scruffy wallpaper. Two bunk beds were stacked as a unit against the opposite wall. The lump of a girl bulged under a sheet, the ends of her straight long hair--shiny as a black, lacquered

piano--hung over the edge of the lower bunk. The upper bunk didn't have a mattress.

Harry was gone, but his words stayed with Suchin. "Give it up," he said as his breath tickled her ear, "The beat don't work good." He didn't touch her.

Suchin dozed to the sounds of flies chasing each other around the room. She woke just before all the light faded. The girl under the sheet hadn't moved. Suchin could hear Auntie bumping around somewhere down below on the first floor.

Suchin was achy all over, but less now. Her leg throbbed but when she stood and pressed down, the pain eased.

"Who you?" she called to the lump on the bed.

She waited a minute. "You living?"

She hobbled over slowly and peeled back the sheet. She sucked in a rush of air.

"You beautiful," she said suddenly aware of trying to use her very best English. The girl had the delicate sculpted features of a porcelain doll and her eyes were wide open, the whites showing all around irises so brown they seemed almost as black as the pupil. She stared straight through Suchin, deep into some other galaxy.

"My name's Suchin. From China. Six months. Came on a ship."

The girl didn't change.

"You sleep like that?" Suchin asked. "Your eyes open?"

She thought the girl's eyes focused a little, her lips parted slightly.

"You like it here?"

The girl closed her eyes slowly, she was breathing faster, and she turned away. She wasn't a druggie, Suchin thought. Her eyes were too hard for that.

Auntie's mountainous form filled the open door behind Suchin. Auntie came into the room, light from the hall making a faint halo behind her.

"She talk to you?" Auntie asked.

Suchin didn't move keeping her back to Auntie.

"Well, don't you be bothering her," Auntie said. "She's having some time to herself until she talks again."

Suchin stayed stone still, not knowing how to feel about Auntie. But she wasn't afraid.

Auntie gave Suchin a bowl of red beans and rice with a plastic spoon stuck in it and pulled up a chair next to the girl to begin feeding her soup from a Campbell's can. "Mushroom only thing she'll eat. Don't like tomato," she said, mostly to herself.

When she finished Auntie turned to take Suchin's empty bowl. "You moving better than I thought. You scamming Auntie?"

Suchin stayed quiet.

"Well, you pick up that chamber potty and empty it in the bathroom down the hall before I lock up again. Wash it out good too."

For hours after Auntie closed the door and turned the key in the lock, Suchin lay on her cot; but no sleep came. She wondered where that girl's eyes were looking, what they saw. She wondered if she was thinking about the men. How men treated girls. She wondered if the girl thought too, if you did right, maybe someday a man take you away and be good to you. All the girls had heard of that

happening—a nice man. But they never knew anyone it happened to, only knew by the story telling that skipped from girl to girl like a flu bug.

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It was still half dark when Suchin woke. The lump girl was sitting on the floor cross-legged, her hands on her stomach and she was rocking slow--front, back, front.

Suchin eased off the bed and stretched, watching the girl. Suchin's leg and chest hurt less.

Two glasses of water and a saucer with two oven-cooked rolls sat on the floor inside the locked door. Suchin drank and ate a roll. "You want this?" she said tempted to eat the second roll. But the girl said nothing and Suchin left the water and the roll close enough for her to reach.

Suchin's leg didn't bend easily, and she lay down on her side, her legs straight out to one side, her head propped up on her hand with her arm on the floor bent at the elbow.

The black-haired girl rocked. Forward. Back. Forward.

"My mother's dead. Father dead too," Suchin said staring under the bed as if to find some hidden non-person in the dark recess.

Back, forward, back, the girl went on. Her eyes never blinking.

"Yours too? Your parents?"

Forward, back, forward, about as fast as a pendulum in a giant clock.

"It's okay. I know you're like the rest of us. Sometime you need to get away."

The girl still rocking.

The door unlocked and Auntie came in. "In the name of God, leave that child alone. You too healthy and she too sick for you to keep bothering her." She yanked Suchin up to sitting then grabbed the girl's shoulder to stop her rocking and held the glass of water to the girl's mouth. The girl swallowed a few times.

"Now for you," she said grabbing Suchin. "I'll take you to the bathroom to wash that dried blood off. Then I'll sew up that dress and give it a good wash."

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That night after Auntie put them both in bed, Auntie came back in with a flashlight because the light socket for the screw-in bulb in the ceiling was empty. She sat in a chair next to the girl's bed, her back to Suchin. She opened a book with a torn red cover. Suchin was lying on her cot, looking to the ceiling.

"It was Toto," Auntie read in a low singsong voice.

"Who was Toto?" Suchin asked.

"Shut your face," Auntie said shining the light straight into Suchin's eyes.

"This is Helen's story."

Suchin turned away but not far enough so she couldn't hear.

"You don't need story telling," Auntie said to Suchin before turning her flashlight back to the book again to read.

"It was Toto that made Dorothy laugh, and saved her from growing as gray as her other surroundings." Auntie paused. "Toto was not gray; he was a little black dog, with long silky hair and small black eyes that twinkled merrily on either side of his funny, wee nose. Toto played all day long, and Dorothy played with him, and loved him dearly."

“Who’s Dorothy?” Suchin couldn’t keep from asking.

“She’s an orphan. Now hold your tongue.” But the meanness was not in her voice.

Auntie continued loud enough that Suchin could hear. ““Today, however, they were not playing. Uncle Henry sat upon the doorstep . . .”

Suchin wondered what Uncle Henry would do to Dorothy, then listened all about Kansas and Oz, a world that, as Auntie continued reading, Suchin imagined might be the real America.

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The lighting bolt lit up the room bright as day just after two AM. Suchin sat straight up and in the after-flash, the room seemed pitch black, even the thin strip of pale yellow under the door from the hall overhead bulb was wiped out. Suchin stood up, limped to the window, and raised the shade. The sky swirled with grey clouds; sheets of rain streaked across the yard and lightening pulsed the pewter sky.

The girl was sitting too, her eyes fixed on Suchin.

“It’s okay,” Suchin said, recovering quickly. She had survived too many nights in the open hut of her grandmother--or more recently the lean-to she shared with her uncle for a while--with storms raging around her--to worry. She sat next to the girl.

“We got to get away,” Suchin said. “You understand?”

The girl stared at her with eyes black in the darkness. She turned her head and her black hair flowed around her face.

“Now!”

“No,” the girl said. Her voice was deep and raspy.

“We can do it.”

“No!” She shoved Suchin away and she took a deep breath and screamed.

“What are you doing?”

“You go!” the girl said.

“You too.”

“I can’t,” she said. “I don’t think right sometime.”

The girl’s eyes had shifted from terror to some fierce determination. She screamed again, getting off the bed and she took a chair that Auntie had been reading in and smashed the window twice so all the glass was gone.

The key in the lock turned and as Auntie rumbled in, the girl, after a quick glance of clear-bolt sanity thrown at Suchin, headed for the window, throwing herself half out, but not far enough to fall.

Auntie lunged across and grabbed the girl by the legs. “You crazy!” she said. “It’s a long way down.”

The door was open. Suchin slipped out, felt her way down the stairs, out the front door, across the porch. She could see orange groves outlined against the sky. Rain swept across her face until she reached the protection of the first line of trees. She stumbled on, running as fast as her sore leg would allow. It would be many minutes before Auntie could follow. She heard Helen still screaming, demanding Auntie’s attention. Even hurting, Suchin knew she could keep her distance from someone as big and slow as Auntie. In minutes she reached the river and headed

down stream looking for something that would float. Soon the rain stopped, the wind died, and an almost full moon threw glints on the surface of the water.

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Antoine and Harry arrived the next morning to take Suchin back. Auntie didn't offer them anything to drink.

"Last I saw of her she was headed for the grove, toward the river. It was a hell of a storm."

"We got to take her away," said Harry.

"Jesus," said Antoine. "Did you go after her?"

"I don't go looking for runaways."

"Mere Bull transferred her to Houston," Antoine said. "They got tight discipline down there. And she's a money maker."

"That girl full of Tabasco."

"There's only one road out. That's where she'll be."

"She don't know the road or the river."

"You think she's hiding?"

"Maybe. But she's smart as they come. Might be long gone by now."

Antoine signaled Harry to move to the car. "Road's the only way out."

"Where's my money?" Auntie asked.

"I ain't paying for letting the kid get away," Antoine said.

Antoine was out the door, following Harry to the car.

Auntie grabbed her shotgun from behind the kitchen door. Stepped back outside.

“Cocksucker,” Auntie yelled. She was waving the shotgun, holding it with one hand in the middle. “You ever show up here again, I’ll blow your head off.”

There was a white girl standing in the door behind Auntie. Even from a distance she was so ghostly beautiful with her white skin and long black hair glistening like black silk. One of the nut cases Auntie was famous for bringing back into the world for service. Antoine slammed the door and drove off.

“That Auntie’s one weird bitch,” he said to Harry. “Probably let the kid go.”

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Antoine and Harry used up a tank of gas cruising the only long road that led out of the parrish but they didn’t see the girl.

“You think she all right?” Harry asked.

“She got to be alive or we’re gator meat,” Antoine said. “She’s worth a lot of money.”

Antoine had to poke Harry to keep him awake, keep him looking. You big dumb gorrilla, he thought. But Harry was good kin. Shit. They’d drawn women’s tits on the bathroom walls at school together. They’d buddied up with whores. Harry had saved his life too, once on a B and E when the owner tried to kill him with a shotgun, once in a knife fight in the ninth ward.

At night they slept in the car in a truck stop parking lot before heading south in the early morning. They changed their search, asking in the towns for anyone who’d seen a pretty barefoot Chinese girl about four feet high wearing a ripped up white dress.

It was just after eleven o'clock they cornered Suchin in the storeroom of a convenience store just North of Venice. The woman owner had let a Chinese girl sleep for a few hours after her daughter found her down near the river and brought her home.

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Suchin awoke, startled by an outside noise. The windowless room was black until the door opened and light from the store's fluorescent overhead bulbs outlined Antoine's silhouette coming toward her. Framed in the door behind him was the bulk of Harry. Antoine gripped her arm, with the force she knew and dreaded, and pulled her upright. In seconds, he'd dragged her into the store toward the high counter where the woman owner stood watching. Suchin looked around. Through the glass door on the front she could see two gas pumps with a red pickup truck parked in front with the tailgate down and long lengths of lumber sticking out a few feet with a red flag hanging limply on the end of the longest board. A door to the restroom opened. She watched a man come out, go through the door toward the pick up. Harry went into the restroom.

Antoine let her go and he turned to buy a lighter and cigarettes. She slipped down the aisle between the motor oil and potato chips, out the door. She grabbed the lumber on the back of the truck and pulled herself up as the truck accelerated and lurched without a stop onto the road. She was in the truck and lying face down, the truck bed vibrating under her as it went through gears to reach cruising speed. She stayed low. Within two minutes, looking back, she saw the Lincoln, the headlights flashing. It gained on the truck, the horn blaring. The pickup slowed. Antoine

pulled up to the side of the truck. He was yelling for the pickup to pull over. The pickup stopped. Antoine parked the Lincoln in front of the truck, off the road. Suchin slipped down from the truck bed and limped up a drive toward a house, but Antoine and Harry reached her before she could hide.

Harry was breathing hard.

“What a way to make a living,” Antoine said as he and Harry took Suchin back toward the Lincoln.

The pick up truck driver was explaining he didn’t know she was there.

“I’m cool,” Antoine said.

“Why are you chasing her?”

“Wise up, man. Forget you ever saw her.”

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While Harry held Suchin, Antoine emptied the trunk of the Lincoln—a bag of golf clubs, a Styrofoam cooler, fishing rods, small outboard motor, and a five-gallon can of gasoline. He put them in the back seat. Then with two-inch tape he bound Suchin’s arms to her chest with around-the-body passes from shoulders to waist. It was hard for Suchin to take a deep breath.

“I could keep her up front,” Harry said.

Antoine lifted Suchin’s dress and made seven passes of tape around her thighs. “I ain’t taking any chances. We got a long way to go.” He made seven more passes of tape around her ankles. She was still standing when he picked her up and put her in the trunk. “Damn if she can get out of that.”

Harry held the trunk lid open when Antoine tried to close it.

Antoine wanted to belt Harry, but he held back. They needed to be moving. "Be sure it's locked," Antoine said and went to the front

Harry turned Suchin on her back, took a loose tire iron out from under her and put it next to the back of the seat where it wouldn't hurt and shut the lid. In minutes they were on their way to Houston, back through New Orleans because that was the only way out of the delta.

Antoine smoked continuously as he drove. Harry slept with his head against the door until they reached Port Sulfur. Suchin had cried out a few times, but there were no sounds from the trunk now.

"Maybe she don't need to go to Houston," Harry said.

"And maybe Mere Bull and the big man will just be happy that all that money to get the kid bought in China on top of the cash to ship her and slip her in will never be returned."

"Houston not a good place."

"Maybe they send her back when she gets broken in," Antoine said.

"She got the beat."

"They're kids, for Christ sake. You got to learn not to care, Harry. They ain't like regular people."

They stayed quiet, passing through Algiers, then New Orleans, then up on the I-10. Soon they were near the airport.

Suchin was yelling.

"See if you can tell what she wants," Antoine said.

Harry leaned over the seat and pushed the motor and gas can aside. "She needs to pee."

"Shit. Tell her we ain't stopping till we get to Houston."

Harry told her loud so she could hear through the backseat.

"I got to go bad!" she yelled. Antoine heard that.

Harry came back in the front seat. "We got to let her pee."

"Okay. Okay!" Antoine pulled onto the breakdown lane where it was dark. He popped the trunk lid. "Go get her."

Antoine opened the front and rear doors on the right side. "Bring her in between the doors. No one will see."

Harry set her down on her feet between the doors and had to hold her upright; she was too tightly taped to bend.

"I can't sit," she said.

"Do it standing up then."

"I can't."

"We got to cut the tape," Harry said.

"We ain't cutting the tape. I've only got a couple feet left."

"Let it go," Antoine said to Suchin and hit her lightly on the head. Harry still held her, afraid she'd fall over.

"I can't." But in a few seconds her dress went dark, and then a puddle formed in the dust.

"I'm wet."

"That's so terrible," Antoine whined.

“We should have cut the tape,” Harry said.

“Put her in the back. I ain’t touching her.”

“We got something to wipe her off?”

“Some paper towels under the seat.”

They were back on the road. Harry rested against the door but didn’t sleep.

Antoine turned on the radio.

“What if she calls out or something?” Harry said.

“Won’t make any difference.”

“We won’t hear!”

“Okay, I’ll turn it down!” Antoine turned the music down a little.

Harry reached forward and turned it off.

“Hey, asshole. I’m not going all the way to Houston without music,” Antoine said.

Traffic was light. Antoine drafted behind an eighteen-wheeler in the slow lane to avoid attention.

Suchin called out about half an hour later. “I can’t breathe!”

“Did you hear that?”

“She must be breathing. She’s yelling, for Christ’s sake.’

“We got to check.”

“We don’t have to check. I’m not stopping until we need gas.”

“There might be no air back there.”

“There’s enough.”

Harry stared straight ahead for a few minutes. “She ain’t said nothing,” he said.

“We got an hour, Harry. An hour before we need gas!”

Harry growled as he turned to shove Antoine on the shoulder, shoving him up against the driver’s-side door. “We got to check.”

Antoine looked at Harry in surprise. “Jesus, Harry. Don’t ever do that again. I’d have to whack you.” He kept driving.

Harry was breathing fast, his eyes wide with anger. He drew back and threw a right fist at the side of Antoine’s head. Antoine blacked out for a few seconds, his hands slipping off the wheel, the cruise control holding steady. The Lincoln left the road, Antoine alert in seconds, realized the danger, turned the wheel—jammed the brakes; the car swerved to the left and the right then hit a low bridge abutment head on. Harry moaned.

The engine hissed but had stopped running, pushed back against the firewall by the impact. The dashboard was crumpled, the steering wheel inches from Antoine’s chest, the front window cracked and mostly gone. The night air floated into the car, damp and oppressive mixing with the stinging smell of gasoline from the tipped gas can in the back seat.

“Can you move?” Antoine asked Harry. Harry worked to open the door.

“Get out!” Antoine said. Antoine’s door was crushed and he slid out Harry’s side.

He could not let the kid be found, or any evidence remain in the car. “Run” he said. He reached in his pocket, lit a lighter, and threw it in the back seat. There was a burst of flame. He pushed Harry. “Run. It’ll blow.”

“The key.” Harry said. “The kid.”

“Leave her!” Antoine said. But the keys were to many locks and could be evidence and they were in his hand. He slipped them in his pocket. “It’s going to blow.”

Antoine started running.

Harry went to the trunk pulling up on the lid. Nothing budged. He kicked, once, twice, three times. Fire flared in the open doors. Finally the trunk lid rose. Harry grabbed Suchin, her skin pale, her eyes shut.

Antoine was thirty yards away. The explosion, loud enough to hurt the ears, shot flames above the trees into the night sky. Metal and glass propelled with bullet speed. Harry didn’t stop running, Suchin cradled in his arms. The clothes on his back burst into flame. His right carotid artery had been severed by a piece of glass that still glinted on the side of his neck, he stumbled on, finally falling forward. Suchin hit the ground face first. Harry fell just behind her.

Antoine reached Harry in seconds and stomped out the few burning cloth fragments that remained. Then he rolled his cousin over. He was breathing.

Harry coughed on his own blood. His eyes opened. “She okay?” he asked.

Antoine swore. The flames threw flickering shadows on his face and pinpoint, wiggling reflections glowed on his eyes.

Antoine turned Suchin over. She'd been dead a while, he could tell from the bloodless facial wounds on her face.

"Antoine," Harry gasped, "She okay?"

"She'll make it."

"You take care of her."

"Sure, man."

Despite the burning glow on his skin from the fire, Antoine shivered. He crossed himself.

Harry stopped breathing; the fire died in his eyes; the spirit shimmered out of him.

God bless you, you big dumb gorilla. The danger is in the caring--not the cops, or the FBI, or the syndicate. You cared too much. Like you ever listened.

Antoine knelt down and closed Harry's eyelids; he picked up the kid and tossed her into the flames of the Lincoln's burning trunk; then, as cars stopped and people were closing in from many directions, he blended into the dark to zigzag a course that would take him away from the city for a while.