

Freckles

by Greg Stolze

I hope the guy we're going to kill has freckles. I looked at his picture, but it was hard to tell—terrible lighting, and he might have just been dirty.

It's Sylvia's turn to drive, which means mostly radio classic rock. Sometimes NPR if we can get it, until it makes her sad or angry. When I drive, I try to find funk or ska, but good luck with that in the American midwest. Iowa, Indiana, Ohio, all those medium-sized states with names bracketed by vowels, or else starting with M.

"So. Lombard, Iowa?" I ask.

"Yup."

"Suppose they have an Olive Garden, or are we gonna be lucky if there's Casey's General Store?"

Sylvia sighs. She's older than me, probably by twenty years though I'd never ask. She's particular about her food, or she tries to be.

"We should stop at a Piggly Wiggly," I say.

"Is that a grocery?"

"You know it is. We could get some kale and whatnot. Quinoa. Throw together a salad in the motel." We stay in motels. Sylvia doesn't trust AirBNB

"Sure. I had a great salad once—shrimp and salmon on raw greens with thousand-island dressing."

"Iowa isn't exactly famed for its seafood."

"It's all the same fish," she says irritably. "They fly it everywhere."

"I suppose you're right."

When we get to Lombard, we check out Wellington's Hardware.

"Look at this," Sylvia says. "You can see where it used to be a Blockbuster."

She's not wrong. The ticket-shaped part of the facade has been repainted to look like a plank of wood. "Yeah, it doesn't seem very busy."

"Of course it's not busy, there's a Walmart out by the grocery store, anyone who needs a nut or a bolt or a Dremmel can get it cheaper there, with better variety. This place is, it's fiscally unfeasible."

We check out the back. One door, no loading gate. We knock, pretty hard. No answer. All right.

When we return to the front, someone walks by the car and gives me a look. I hope it's not recognition. I dropped off the headlines a while back... thinking about it, it's been three years since I got acquitted. Tempus fugit and so forth. I tried to grow a beard, but it itched. I've put on some weight though. Changed my hair. Though really, it's not like I decided on a new look, I just started getting it buzzed down at Supercuts or wherever instead of having it a length you could comb. Marissa used to comb my hair at night, before the trial and all that. She really liked my hair long, but it was a hassle.

After that one pedestrian, nobody. I don't just mean nobody's in Wellington's Hardware, no one's on the street. Lombard might as well be the middle of Death Valley.

Sylvia tilts her head back to look at the photo of our guy, squinting. She wears little old lady glasses and carries her purse slung over her head and right arm, so it can't slide down and off. She's left-handed. After clocking the place for nearly an hour, she cracks her neck and says "Ready to do this?"

"You don't wanna give it a day or two, make some patterns?"

"If it is our guy in there, I don't think it's getting any better than right now."

I check my kit. It's small enough to go in the side pocket of my cargo pants, but just barely. It's pretty bulky and sticks out, but such is life.

"OK, I guess," I say, and we walk into Wellington's.

The guy behind the counter looks like he has never been more bored. Just stultified. He's in his fifties probably, reading a paperback that's yellow around the edges. Doesn't smile, doesn't ask to help us, barely glances our way. Doesn't even *nod*. Yeah, Walmart must be eating this place alive.

There's not a lot of stock, and what's there is dusty. We drift towards the back and Sylvia indicates the big spools of rope. Then she jerks her head towards the counter. I nod.

"Excuse me? Sir?" I call.

“Yeah.” He doesn’t get up.

“I was wondering something.”

“Were you.” Still doesn’t take the hint.

“Could you come here and help me out a little? Or is there maybe someone else if you...?”

He makes that old man sound as he gets off his stool. He comes over slow, with a little bit of a limp. I’d feel bad if I wasn’t trying to convince myself about this guy, that he deserves it.

“What’cha need.” He doesn’t say his questions as questions.

“So which of these is... like, the softest? I guess?” Behind his back, Sylvia is quietly spinning the door sign to “Closed.” There’s a push-bolt at the top of the frame. She locks it.

“Softest,” he repeats. Not like a question. A little bit like he can’t believe it.

“I mean, probably not the hemp here, or nylon... what’s this one, cotton?”

“How much weight do you need it to take,” he asks.

I glance at his height and waistline. “Oh, can’t be more than three hundred pounds. Like two fifty, two sixty.”

He grunts and puts his hand on one spool. “How long do you need.”

“Cut maybe fifty feet, that should do it.” The store has a drop ceiling, but back in the stockroom there’s probably twenty feet of clearance.

There’s a rattle as Sylvia drops the blinds over the windows, but our guy doesn’t look up at the sound, or notice that the store gets a little dimmer. He doesn’t react until he hears the cash register open.

“Hey, what bullshit is this!” he barks. Still not saying it like a question. Sylvia is methodically moving the twenties from the blue and yellow fill into her purse with her right hand. Her left has a 9mm handgun pointing our way—at him more than me, of course. It makes me nervous, but so far she only opened fire one time, in Cleveland.

He jams his hand into his pants pocket but I’m behind him. I wrap him in my arms, tight. He struggles a little, but restraining an aging man with a sedentary lifestyle isn’t the hardest thing I’ve ever done. He tries to kick back at me and,

just like they taught me in my Humane Restraint courses, I tilt him. Soon as he's off balance, the foot goes down. Yeah. About two hundred and fifty pounds.

From this close contact, I can see that he doesn't have freckles, but he does have his share of liver spots. Maybe that's good enough.

The first guy I killed had freckles and that's why they never convicted me.

The name on his chart said "Marcello Cortez" but he didn't look Latin and when I spoke to him in Spanish he just glared. When he called me "clumsy fool" he sounded like the Gestapo guy in a World War II film. He was a client at the Maple Ridge Retirement Facility and I was one of the nursing aides.

According to the chart he was sixty-eight, and he looked hard-used. None of the staff liked him. You can get some unpleasant scenes with older people, especially when they're in pain, but usually there's variety—good days and bad ones. Not this guy. Treated everyone like a servant, nothing was ever good enough and he didn't even have chronic pain or anything as an excuse. He was just an asshole. So we talked a lot about giving him a triple-H (that's a mean old nursing joke about someone needing an enema that's "high, hot, and a hell of a lot") but I didn't think much about him until the Croatian woman showed up.

I never did desk duty, but I was pushing a sweet old cobweb of a woman out to the flower garden when it happened. The visitor had a picture of our patient and wanted to see him, but wasn't on his list—no surprise, he had nobody on his visitor log except his lawyer. She insisted he wasn't Marcello Cortez but "Vuk Cvetković."

The receptionist was very patient, did an outstanding soft stonewall but never wavered from gently insisting there was no "Vook Sweat-cove-itch" at our facility. The poor woman eventually burst into tears.

"He is war criminal!" she wailed. One of the other nurse aides—a big guy, who'd mastered the 'I'm a calming presence and peaceful guy but could absolutely fold you up like a deck chair if I had to' vibe, came and gently escorted her outside.

I couldn't get over how much her accent sounded like his.

When I told Marissa about it, she said "Wow, he'd be about the right age to be one of those Milošević cronies, right? Wouldn't that be *wild*, some Serbian general on the run in South Carolina?"

So we poked all our guesses about the spelling into our search engines and holy shit if the guy didn't turn up. Vuk. Officer under Ratko Mladić. Personally responsible for some genuine awful shit.

"Is that your guy?" Marissa asked, staring at a picture over my shoulder.

"I dunno." The picture was black and white, and pixelated, and my monitor wasn't super-duper sharp. I had a creepy feeling in my gut, but what did that signify? "Who would we even tell?"

"The cops?" she said, but she sounded doubtful.

"Sure, the cops, I guess."

But neither of us did. I mean, it was hardly a crime in progress. The next time I saw him in the dining hall, though, I said "Vuk!" and he turned to look—quick, but it was there. I didn't meet his eye, just kept helping a WWII vet get his oxygen tank arranged. But yeah, I started thinking it was him.

So I called the police non-emergency line with an anonymous tip, and guess what they did.

Did you guess "nothing"? Yeah.

I got Marissa to do it too, and she just said "Check out this Marcello Cortez guy at Maple Ridge home, his ID is totally fake," but no blues showed up. I'd have thought the Hispanic name and suggestion of document fraud would really light a fire under them, but nope.

What could I do? Nothing, I had no proof, I wasn't sure, and he wasn't going anywhere. Does the US even support the International whatever at the Hague? Sylvia would know, I guess. But nobody was listening, nothing was happening, nobody cared. Then he threw a kidney stone.

Ever had one? They suck. Women have told me it's like giving birth. Men say "Imagine getting kicked in the nuts, every few hours, for nine days." I guess if anyone deserved that treatment, it was Vuk, but I dunno. I feel like there's enough suffering in this world without generating more.

(I'm sure that sounds ironic, considering what I did to Cvetković and my plans for the hardware clerk, but it's true. I don't think people should suffer. Pain is the enemy.)

The drugs prescribed for Marcello Cortez's renal colic were on a very strict schedule, and if you've ever dealt with a narcotics scrip, you know doctors

don't up doses or frequency unless they *love* you, and nobody loved that guy. He was a half-hour out from his next pill, sweating clean through his sheets and making those little groans and whines that are hard to fake. He was so hard up for relief that he got polite.

"Please. Carlo. You are a good man, a kind man. Just give me pill. You know it's OK, I am not become drug addict, *please*."

I didn't think about it, I just said, "Tell me something only Vuk Cvetković would know."

The guy *hissed*. He was already pale under his freckles, but he got paler. Started crying. Then he started saying stuff in some foreign language, low and mumbly. It sounded nasty.

I couldn't help it, I got his damn pill, and that very night he dropped the rock, and I dropped a dime on him to the cops, *again*. They did nothing, *again*.

A week after that, he tried to bribe me. He'd been giving me the stink eye, his face half scared and half this baffled, frustrated rage. After about five days of that, he got a visit from his singular guest, a jowly guy in a suit. Once the suit left, Vuk gestured me into his room and showed me a gold coin.

"You ever see a krugerrand before? Heh, when would you?" He gave me a gross little smile. "I have not so many left, but in my safety deposit box, yes, a little supply. A little nest. You know my past but what good does it do you to... what is the phrase? Rat out me? Does it matter if I remind people, if I die in a gray little room instead of this white one? But coin, this can make a difference, I think." He folded my fingers over it. "For you, yes? And more, so long as you are silent."

It was a 1980 coin, one tenth of an ounce, worth a couple hundred bucks. Of course I showed Marissa.

"Maybe he's just a crazy old man," she said.

"It's fucked up," I said. "It's a fucked up situation."

Eventually, I got hold of the woman who had his accent. The Croatian. She remembered Vuk, all right. I think she's going to remember him until the day she dies. She told me stories, stuff she'd heard and then the stuff she'd been there for. Showed me scars even when I begged her to stop, when I started crying. It was awful.

So the next time I had a night shift, I brought ol' 'Marcello Cortez' a few plastic airline bottles of Stoli along with his nightly sleeping pill. (The guy had trouble sleeping. Go figure.)

"I think you want another coin," he said, and I did my best to smile back at him, like yeah, you got me, you figured me out buddy.

I gave him some time and when it was quiet and dark and the midnight hour, I snuck into his room with a syringe and gave him a barrel full of air.

It wasn't easy getting that syringe, either. Even in my line of work, they're not falling from the sky like rain. I got hold of a used one—when you're planning on blasting someone to God's mercy seat with a fatal embolism, blood contagion and such suddenly seems way less important. It was gigantic, too. People fret over a tiny bubble in their IV line, but my research suggested it's at least fifty milliliters to get decent odds. I went for the full hundred because I wanted to get this done right the first time.

He was snoring hard when I uncovered his arm. Like a lot of skinny guys, he had prominent veins. When I was in nursing school, I worked as a phlebotomist at the blood bank. I like to think my needlework was good, more than one person marveled that I could do a draw without it hurting at all. There's tricks to it, and I used them as I slid the needle into Vuk's antecubital. He partly woke up but by then it was in position and I had his arm pinned.

Pushing that plunger all the way down seemed to take forever.

It's funny how time stretches out when things are bad. It's like you're scared, so your brain tries to fill up every little second before you croak. It's the same with Sylvia in the hardware store, leaving the register and coming closer, saying "Don't be a dummy," in a very neutral, no-nonsense tone.

"What's this about," the guy in my arms asks. He's still squirming a little, like he doesn't want me to think he caved in, but isn't giving it his all. Maybe he's just testing me without wearing himself out. I stay alert about it. "Is this about that internet shit. Jesus, it was a joke. I'm just a big Chappelle fan."

"What?" Sylvia and I both say it at the same time. She slows as she nears, keeping the gun high and back, too far for him to grab if he somehow frees himself. Her right hand produces disposable handcuffs, the plastic kind, as she says, "These are going on you. Don't do anything stupid and you'll come out of this OK." She gets it to me and I work it onto one of his hands.

“Look, you emptied the till, you got me. Take my wallet. Hell, the gun in my pocket’s probably worth a couple hundred to one of your stickup pals. Just stay cool.”

“I’m cool. Are you cool?” Sylvia asks.

“Sure. Yeah.”

He’s not lying. He acts like getting robbed at gunpoint is just some hassle, like a long line at the gas pump. I get his hands cuffed in front of his belt buckle, then slip my hand into his pocket to get the gun.

“Buy me dinner first,” he mutters and I can’t help chuckling—nervously, sure—even as Sylvia says, “Hey, shut up.”

Once I back away with his tiny black revolver, Sylvia aims her own piece at the floor and puts on the safety. “OK. Good. Everyone’s using indoor voices. Let’s go to the back.”

“What for. C’mon, you got what you want.” He sounds harder, suspicious and now I can see it. This guy isn’t just some Midwest concealed-carry paranoid. He’s been in life-or-death situations before.

“You and me need to have a conversation, *Gino*,” Sylvia says, and his shoulders drop. “We need to decide on some things.”

“Fuck. Who sent you two. Johnny T or Rope Steven, I’d bet. Shit. How’d you find me.”

“Come on in back,” she repeats, and I turn to open the door.

I’m only one step towards it when I hear the impact. I spin around and the two of them are crashing back and forth between the shelves. Shit! I sprint up on him, grab an arm and get it tight just as Sylvia hockey-checks him, hip right into his bladder. With his pelvis knocked back, he stumbles and I drag him back onto his butt. He tries to struggle, but each time his feet get any traction, Sylvia kicks out his heels.

The guy’s no quitter, and he curses steadily as we manhandle him into the back.

“Where’s the light switch?” Sylvia barks.

“Up your asshole!”

For just a moment I think he might stroke out, saving us the trouble of staging everything. I wonder if his wrists are visibly chafed—we went for plastic cuffs in

hopes of preventing the kind of pre-mortem bruising people get struggling against metal.

I sit down behind him, like we're in a bobsled, and crab up on him with my arms and legs both. He keeps fighting, but we're an even weight match and mine isn't all in a spare tire.

"This coulda been a lot easier," Sylvia snarls, pulling a plastic sack out of her purse and looping it over his head. Shit.

I hate this part. It's like I *feel* the fear in him as soon as he sees it, feel it pass from his body into mine. It's a big sturdy bag for freezer storage, not like the cheap Piggly Wiggly ones that blow away and get stuck in trees everywhere. It's just about skull size, and he shakes hard, trying to keep it off. He knows what's coming.

I turn my head, even as I keep hold. I can't watch, but I feel his thrashing get desperate as Sylvia tightens it. As she smothers him.

"That's enough," I say.

"No."

"C'mon!" I'm begging, and she pulls it loose.

He takes a deep, shuddering inhale and starts to sob.

"All righty then," Sylvia says, backing away and crumpling the bag between her hands. "Let's try this again without the nonsense."

Sylvia scares me sometimes, but she didn't at first. Not at all. I mean, she looks half librarian, half P.E. teacher, like she should have two cats and be really into kayaking. When she approached me that very first time, I was skittish. I was staying at my mom's and she just came up to the door and knocked. And knocked. She kept knocking for about thirty minutes, I swear, and finally I said, "I'm not talking to the press."

"Good," she said. "Smart. I'm not press." She showed me a little ID card.

"I'm sorry, but I don't talk to cops without a lawyer present. You get it, I'm sure."

"Look at the date," she said, tilting the card and pointing. "This is expired. I'm retired."

"OK," I said, "Well, I don't really want to talk to an ex-cop, either."

“Marshal,” she said. “Former marshal. And if you don't want to talk, how about I buy you a steak dinner and you just listen?”

I don't know why I went along with it. Part of it, I think, was boredom. Have you ever been stuck at home, in COVID lockdown or whatever? If you were, you know how dull it gets, not going out, no change of scenery, trying to think of something new and not being able to. Another part was, she seemed sad. Weird, right? Like she was doing some chore. Mostly, when someone offers you a steak just to listen, they're trying to convince you of something. Which, I guess, she was. But there wasn't that oily, faked enthusiasm, no “C'mon, pleeeeeease?” feel.

I hadn't had a steak in a while, either.

She was pretty blunt at dinner. She knew where bad dudes were—real shitheels, ones who got away with it. “Like your man Cvetković,” she said, pronouncing it just right.

“Look, I don't know what you read,” I said automatically, but she held up her hand.

“You had nothing to do with it, you were just his nurse aide with some suspicions, the papers blew it up outta proportion, I know, I know, nothing could be proved. Sure.” She looked at me over those little old lady spectacles. “But the facts are, if that guy wasn't evil, the word means nothing, and the world's better with him dead. However that happened to happen.”

I leaned back. Shrugged. The steak was great but I wasn't enjoying it much.

“All I'm saying is, you've seen that situation and didn't like it, and I'm telling you that situation is happening all over the Midwest.” She'd ordered some kind of vegetable medley, and she took an unenthusiastic bite of broccoli before adding, “On Uncle Sam's dime, if that makes you care.”

“What are you talking about?”

“When I was a US Marshal, I worked in Witness Protection,” she said. “I got real sick of seeing guys who'd done maybe five rapes and two murders get set up in suburbia because they wore a wire and talked to a guy about his cargo plane full of coke.”

“Those numbers seem very specific,” I said.

She just nodded.

"It got worse than that," she morosely told her squash rings as she moved the pepper slices to the side. "Listen, there's an old-boy network, political appointees to ADAs to dark money funding sources and... yeah, people got in the program who never should have."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean someone who smuggled heroin to arm white supremacist militias right here in the US. Paid their web hosting bills, too. A guy like that should not get into WITSEC because he gives up the names of two 'human traffickers' who were barely pimps. I mean, these so-called masterminds were basically accountants for Craigslist escorts who did scheduling as a value-add. Not quite Sammy Gravano, you know? But they were that neo-Nazi's Get Out Of Jail Free card after he got busted red-handed on armed robbery. His buddies in the system couldn't quite get the charges dropped, so this was the next best thing."

I shrugged. "Life is unfair."

"Sure is," she agreed. "Wouldn't it be great if it was unfair to those assholes for once?"

That was two years before we parked in front of Wellington's Hardware. George Wellington, the owner/proprietor, used to be Gino "Scud" Scuderi and he's the first actual Mafia mobster we went after. Fourth job overall.

"Focus up, Scuderi. Hey. You with us?" Sylvia says.

"F-fuck you..." he whimpers, but when she crumples the bag he shies away, still blubbering.

"Goddamit, ease off him!"

"Fine, fine," Sylvia says, probing her ribs and wincing. "Listen, Gino, buddy, we know a lot, all right? We know what you did. We know about Polanco, yeah? Remember him?"

He nods, resigned. He's recovering pretty fast, wiping his nose on his shoulder as best he can, but I don't let him go. He seems licked though.

"Yeah, his mom still has to take care of him. What the hell, Gino? You get carried away?"

"It was Johnny T did most of that," he said. "I gave the little bastard some hell, sure, but Johnny T just... I dunno. Lost his shit. Maybe he was showing off in front of the crew."

“And you took the fall for it?”

He takes a deep breath, coughs, then looks her in the eye. I can't see his eyes because of how I'm situated, but something in them puts Sylvia back a half-step. “I knew I was going into WITPRO, so I figured I might as well take that off him on my way out.”

“You're a real prince. You know he'd do worse to you if he could find you, right?”

“Johnny T's in jail and he can't find me. Unless he did, and that's you two assholes. That about right.”

“Actually no. We talked to Mrs. Polanco, told her for a reasonable sum we'd park you in the dirt.” I think she enjoys this. That bitter smile she gets. I dunno.

“What goes around comes around, I guess.”

“Here's the thing though, in my experience... in my *experience*, guys like you like to have a nest egg. A rainy-day fund. Your fuck-off money. Whatever you want to call it.”

He doesn't say anything, just seems to become heavier in my arms.

“We are very interested in where that money is, Gino,” Sylvia says, crumpling the bag. This time he doesn't react.

“So I buy you off and you lie to Polanco's mom. Sure. Right. You get your dollars coming and going, nice. But how much you think I've racked up in this shit burg selling hammers,” he asks in that neutral gravel voice. “I got a bank account, that's all. You going to drive me to the ATM, what.”

“I bet you have something else. Something close. Here or at the house. Come on, Gino. You know this is the end, we got you. Why not dime up and spare yourself some sadness? That money won't help you.”

“Or else you kill me, is that it.”

“Do you think I won't?” Sylvia asks quietly.

He eyes her and sighs. “No, you got the look.”

“If I'm honest, Gino, we were always planning to kill you and stage it as a suicide, or some medical accident—that's my friend's thing here.”

“Your mama must be real proud a’ you,” he says, turning his face towards mine, and it’s my turn to say, “Hey, shut up!”

“What we would like, is for you to write a suicide note—maybe something about how the guilt over Polanco ate at you, that would be nice—then we load you up with booze and fentanyl, and you wash away on a warm sleepy tide.”

“After telling you about this cash stash, so you can rob it off my corpse like a pair of fuckin’ vultures.”

“See? You get it. Nobody said you were dumb.”

“Eat my fuck.”

“Gino, if it was up to me I would make bag stuff look like a manicure,” she starts, and before I know it, I’m talking too.

“Please man, just do it, I don’t want to see that again, please just let me do it easy.”

Earlier, I felt the fear go from his body into mine. I think maybe he feels it go from me to him too, knows this isn’t some kind of play we’re running on him, knows that I am scared to hell I’m going to have to watch my partner torture him.

“I’ll write the note,” he says. “Fentanyl, you say. I figured you were going to hang me.”

“That was plan B,” Sylvia tells him. “And the money?”

“You’re imagining it. I can barely get my handlers to pay for my diabetes meds. Sorry, but this rainbow ain’t got a pot of gold.”

She grips the bag a little, and I know she’s thinking of giving him another go, and he knows it, and I give her the hardest glare I can as I shake my head.

“OK,” she says at last.

The sun seems flat as we drive away. It’s always like that. It was like that with Vuk too. I didn’t cry or throw up, but man, it felt like something important just... went away.

It was Marissa who fucked me over, of course. The cops didn’t give a shit that some war crime rape mastermind was retired under a false name, but as soon as she told the papers she was scared her boyfriend was a nursing home Angel of Death and so on—yeah, that made noise.

I didn't like jail. There was some harsh language and whatnot, but being in for Murder One gets you some benefit of the doubt from the population. I kept to myself, bitched about being unable to make bail, kept my eyes open and my back to the wall.

Luckily, one of the old gals from the home had a lawyer daughter who was, in the best possible way, a loud pushy pain in the ass. She made sure the guards knew I wasn't some forgotten back number they could knock around, and at trial she made the M.E. look like an absolute ass clown. Because he never found an injection site, you know? Nothing on the tox screen because it was all air. Absolutely could have been Mother Nature telling an old guy with a history of stress, "Yo, you're past your 'use by' date, time for you to feed some daisies."

She always told me to never talk to the press, ever, before or after or during. I got offers to tell my side of the story and she assured me that I would get one check—which would be smaller than expected, she guaranteed—and it would ruin my life forever.

"The only defense you have against these pricks is, *be boring*," she said. So I did that.

She also explained that she'd had coffee and a danish with someone at the cop shop to try out her material about Vuk Cvetković getting away with it under their noses, despite multiple calls saying "It's a war criminal! He's getting away with it! He's right under your nose!" The idea of that kind of *narrative attention* made them much less enthusiastic about getting a conviction on me, so the police testimony was suddenly a lot of wooden "I can't speak to that" "I am not reliably informed" "a solid determination was never made" and suchlike.

Marissa moved away to Colorado and even sent me a letter saying she was sorry but that she really was scared and also she was glad I got acquitted, hoped I'd remember her fondly. (I don't.)

I think about Marissa as we drive back to the motel, and for just a minute I imagine Sylvia giving her the ol' plastic bag treatment. No, not even a minute, just a second, but it's like I shy away from even the thought. Sylvia would never do it, and I couldn't stand seeing Marissa like that, even if I could stand seeing her again in any circumstances, which I can't. Most of all, I could never stand being the guy who set it in motion. I'd be no better than Gino and Vuk if I did that.

Well, no, I'd still be better than Vuk. That guy was like shit scraped off the devil's hoof.

I make that salad but we eat separately, her in one room and me in another. It's not cheap, but we turn enough on these jobs to get two rooms.

We're not murdering all that often, really. A little more than once a year. Rest of the time I'm at home with my mom, living in my old room from high school, taking some classes online. Sylvia isn't married, or at least she's never ever mentioned anyone. I dunno, maybe she wants to keep her home life separate. I would.

"Long drive back to South Carolina," she says the next morning. "You want first shift?"

"D'you mind doing it? I didn't sleep too well."

She grunts. We hit the road. Classic rock, until she switches away from *Takin' Care of Business* with a little oath.

"You don't like... what, was that Sugarloaf?"

"It was Bachman Turner Overdrive," she says. "Pervert shit."

"What?"

"Yeah. Turner and overdrive are maybe OK, but Tim Bachman's gross. Even if they never convicted him, I mean... a rich famous rock star even gets indicted? Twice? There's some dark shit happening."

She tunes in Fresh Air on NPR and I let the road and Terry Gross lull me until we hit the Illinois border. Then, when I get back from a pee break at a Citgo, she's on the phone, a little flip phone that's as close as anyone's going to get to a disposable.

"We got another one," she says, and I groan without thinking about it.

"What?" she asks. "This is great. It's just down in Kansas, we extend by a few days, a week at most if the guy's, like, embedded in his community..."

"Sylvia, I can't just do this and do it and do it."

"What?"

"I'm tired of this stuff. You know?"

"Let's get in the car," she says, and we do. She gathers her thoughts while I help her merge onto the highway, then says, "Is this because Gino got

rambunctious? C'mon, you handled him like a champ, like an MMA fighter! I was the one who got shoved into a case full of circular saws."

"It's not that," I say, and even I can hear the whine in my voice. "This is stressful."

"Yeah, well, but it also pays well."

"You don't believe that. Once every couple seasons it's a payoff that's about like six months of nursing home work. We have to drop everything to do it, and the people paying for this, most of them can't really afford it, now can they? It's not like we're working for that 'Johnny T,' now is it?"

She says nothing, just guns it to pass an RV. I suddenly have a very bad feeling.

"Is it?" I press.

"If you think we're on the payroll for gangsters..." She glances over, brow furrowed and makes a little frustrated noise in the back of her mouth. "If you think that, I'm genuinely hurt," she says after a while. And I believe her. Sylvia is a lot of things, but I've never seen her lie about anything serious for more than ten minutes. It's like she can't be bothered.

"No, I think instead that the mom you talked about, Poblano's mom?"

"Polanco," she says.

"Whatever, I think Mrs. Polanco had to dip into her crippled son's GoFundMe or his civil suit against the friggin' Mafia to pay for us, you and me, what we did to Gino. And who's it help?"

"It helps you and me, for one. You been sending out the ol' résumé there, Carlos? Getting many bites?"

"Hey, shut up."

We're quiet for a bit. The thing about these long rides, you can take your time. Gather your thoughts and whatnot.

"Sounds like this guy's one of the white supremacists," she starts.

"I'm not sure that matters."

"Took part in a hate crime," she continues. "Fingerprints on the girl's wrists, they got him dead to rights, him and his son, though his neighbor skated."

"Sylvia..."

"If it's not us, then who? Hm? The government had its crack at him and decided to give him a do-over because... I dunno, because his sister sucked off a judge or because someone at the Justice department is secretly nostalgic for the 1860s."

"I'm tired, Sylvia."

"You think this is something where you can just opt out?"

She says it right when I'm done, like she wasn't even listening, just waiting to talk. I think she didn't take that pause to consider, I think that kinda slipped out.

"You going to kill me, Sylvia? Is that what that was?"

"Carlos, no, *Jesus!*"

"You don't get to take that offended tone! You ain't entitled to that!"

"Fine. Sorry. I just... I need this, all right?"

"Do you?"

"I have nothing else. I did..." She makes a funny noise. Not a sob, but something like one. "My whole career was part of the *lie*. It was all just mirrors and misdirection, and the old boys looking out for the other old boys. Cops protecting racist bastards because they secretly wished they were doing what they did, you get me? And they're *still there*. It's *still happening*, there's nothing I can do, they're Federal agents, they're untouchable. But these WITSEC goons... I can get them. With you I can do it and... and they won't figure out it's me."

"Sylvia..."

"I need it, and with you it's *sustainable*."

I'm quiet a bit. I watch the green sign on the side of the road as it nears.

"Five miles is the road to South Carolina," I say, confirming it on my phone.

"OK, sure. I'll make that turn. Whatever you want, Carlos."

Now it's her turn to sound whiny, needy.

"Just think about it," she says.

"Like I'm gonna think about anything else."

We drive in silence. The junction is near.

THE END