

Under Construction

Smoke. It gets me every time.

"Smell's the most evocative sense," the old man would say. Him and his Tombstones. But I gotta say he nailed that one.

I'll catch just a whiff of leaves burning in the distance, someone's fall clean-up pyre, and it all comes back. Breath fogging the crisp air. The dry crunch of feet creeping through the woods. The ugly sheen of the moon, turning everything silver. Even now, that's how I remember it.

And Sara.

Dammit, but I miss her.

Nobody got me like she did. She was wired in somehow. You know, she'd finish my sentences. More than that really. I don't know how exactly to describe it, but she could finish my thoughts.

Like when we came up with 'Tombstones.' We were cleaning up in the kitchen, and Dad had just laid one out at dinner.

"Measure twice and cut once, but watch your thumb." His start-in to advice for Sara on some construction project she was working on for the Twins.

"Yeah. 'fore you go tearin' up three miles'a good land, make sure it's a place that really needs a road. And watch what you're doin' even after ya start. Those boys'll blame you if it don't go right."

She hadn't said anything right there. Just sat and played with that lighter I gave her. Her lucky lighter, she called it. Had one of those little dogs on it. Schnauzer I think. She used to like them.

No. Nothing to say then. But later, handing me the plate I already had my hand out for, "Tombstones." Just like that. And I understood.

"Yeah, I gotcha. It's like they're carved in stone or something."

"And hard to move," she said. "He'll never let you win a point."

"And so damned heavy."

That got us going. Next thing you know, we were spitting them out one after the other, deadpan.

"Common sense and hard knocks beat a college degree and fancy socks."

"Make hay while the sun shines. It'll rain later."

"Never too late to start on something you shoulda done yesterday."

Anyhow, we were giggling so hard by the time Dad walked in that I was drying my eyes with the dishtowel.

"Somethin' funny you wanta share with the resta the class?"

What I wanted was to get into it, but all I said was "No, sir," and wondered how much he guessed. I couldn't ever have told him, anyway.

But Sara, she just glided out the door. I miss that too. She was, well, light. Made of air. Dad never got to her. Not Josh and Jacob either, those pukes. Nobody did, really. Except for that night.

I mean, silver. What color is that for somebody's face?

"Opposable thumbs," was how it started. Looking back, that had to be the mother of all Tombstones. The most accurate one anyway. I'd hitch-hiked home from school (the 'stoner-versity', Dad called it), and got a lecture.

"Opposable thumbs are what make man different from the animals. That and the ability to make good decisions."

"Use yours for what they were meant for, not for getting' into trouble."

Right again, dad. Very true.

'Course I didn't start that night out thinking about thumbs. All I wanted to do was to get over to Jimmy's, maybe watch a

little ball while I made my way through a six pack with my feet up on his crappy little coffee table.

That friggin' Ford Fairlane. All of 'em. We had parts of four spread around the yard in front of the house. You could usually make one good one out of the pile. I hated that I had to do that. I swear he kept those old clunkers around so I'd have to ask him for his help. I tried to get the maroon one going that night, and had trouble. I fooled with it for an hour, swearing a blue streak every time I banged my knuckles against the manifold, and couldn't get it to crank. Dad, he came outside and had it started in five minutes.

That made me even madder. I must have been pretty ripped all right, 'cause I can remember climbing in that car and tearing out of the driveway, but not a damn thing until I got out to the flats, and that old rustpile started to peter out. You know what I'm talking about. You're driving down the road and you kinda wake up, and the last couple of miles are blank. I should have known when that happened that it wasn't going to be your usual night. But, like Dad used to say, "Some things you just don't see comin' 'til you're lookin' back at 'em.

So, anyway, there I was on the flats. In the right car, the flats are an awesome place to drive. I got Jimmy's old Camaro up to 125 out there and the sucker started shaking so bad we thought she was gonna fall apart. But what a rush! You are the king when you're behind the wheel and going that fast.

But not that night. Like I said, I came over the rise, got partway down the straightaway, and then that old red heap o' bolts started drizzling down to nothing. It was like watchin' a candle when the wind's blowing. It would skip, and you thought it was gone, and it would find a way to hang in there. Usually, when that happened, I'd just gun it a little and punch through. But when I hit the gas, she gave a long low burp and went quiet. I probably coasted another couple of hundred yards (you could do that on the flats), and we just sat there in the moonlight.

At least I had the light. That moon was bright. It was almost like being out in the daytime, especially out in the open where there weren't trees. But that light was one you couldn't trust. Too silver. Or maybe too grey. And thick. The dark side of an old quarter that's been at the bottom of a puddle for a week. It used to be bright and full of promise, but now it's faded and slimy.

I tried to play around under the hood a little. Sprayed some EZGo into the carb. But she wasn't taking. So what else could I do? I grabbed the six off the passenger seat, started to walk, and hoped somebody would come by and speed it up a little.

It didn't take long. I was sixty seconds down the road and heard the drone of a big car or truck. I saw the hint of headlights far-off over the horizon, and for a second stuck my stupid opposable thumb out. But something started to needle the back of my brain, and before the lights got real close I hunkered down in a crouch, ran back toward the Ford, and jumped in the high grasses and weeds the other side of the drainage ditch. I twisted around on my stomach and lay there, watching.

When the lights got close, I saw it was Josh's truck, the extended cab. Yeah, that pick-up was as pretty as he was mean. Black, and did it glow under that moon. Guess it wouldn't have made any difference if I had been out there hitching. He wouldn't have picked me up anyway.

First off, he never really liked me that much. I was Sara's brother and all, and she was always showing him up. Then, to top it off, Jimmy and I had helped get him tossed out of the

AmVets hall one night when he'd been picking on old lop-sided Harold.

Harold had been a jeep driver in Korea, had hit a mine, or been shot at, or something, and one side of his face hung down a little more than the other. Well, Josh had come in, clear round the bend about losing some contract down the coast. After about ten beers, he'd started lighting his cigarettes, taking a couple of drags, and flicking the butts at Harold's head.

Jimmy and I and a couple of others dragged him out. The next day Sarge had posted an official proclamation on the message board out front. "Joshua Boudreau, and any known associates, not welcome." So Josh started hanging out down at Toofer's, or in his trailer. No he didn't like me much.

But then again, he never really liked anybody. And he wasn't exactly the kind of person to help somebody out in trouble. Truth be told, he was the kind of person that would make your trouble worse, if he could.

The pick-up glided into a stop down a bit beyond my Fairlane, and Josh jumped out. That boy was as thin and wiry as his brother was big and Neanderthal. And his Brillo Pad hair always

freaked me out. It wasn't smooth curly. It was mean and twisted, and would have leapt off his head and bit me if it could.

But there was definitely something black and ugly about Josh that night. He looked pale, and starved out. His eyes were dark hollows. I mean, they still steamed out something close to hate, but there was another emotion smoldering underneath. Something that made me feel almost like, well, almost like he needed my help. And he looked like he'd been needing it for a long time. But I didn't move - just watched.

Finally, he walked around to the back of the car. I sprinted over to his truck, threw myself over and in, and let the six land in my lap so it wouldn't make any noise. Josh finished inspecting the Fairlane, climbed back in, and muttered something about strange coincidences. We were spitting gravel before the door was even closed.

I could hear him grumbling to himself through the window.

"Gotta swing by Jimmy D.'s, just to make sure. Yeah. Can't be. Just my imagination."

Well, speaking of coincidences, that didn't seem like a bad one. I'd just jump out at Jimmy's, stay the night, wake up with a hangover and get Jimmy to drive me back out to the flats in the morning and fix up the Fairlane. Just as long as I didn't have to call the old man to do it. Hell, I'd stand there working on it all day if it meant I didn't have to ask him for help.

I sat back against the side panel, and started thinking about how to break into the six without turning Josh's head around. My eye started moving around the bed of the pick-up, taking inventory. His tools were strewn all over. I was sitting on a pair of jumper cables. There were about half a dozen bungees scattered about. A couple of DieHard batteries lay next to me, one with the terminals all corroded. A come-along was pressed up against the cab, and a lumpy blue tarp covered a pile of something in the corner. Mulch maybe, or loam.

I could smell gasoline, and saw the greasy red plastic can covering up the back corner of the tarp, and a big stray wood chip sitting next to it. The gas - that smell spooked something in me, that's for sure. I told you smell was the most evocative sense. Yeah, I smelled that gas and all of a sudden other smells popped right into my head (my nose?) right along with it. I smelled the exhaust fumes on the Fairlane. I smelled the old

man's cologne, from standing next to him as he got the engine cranking, and the oil-soaked rag that he always kept in his side pocket when he was working and something spilled. But I smelled something dark and acid too, and then I started looking at that tarp, and thinking there was something besides mulch or loam or whatever the hell it was Josh needed for roadwork underneath.

In fact, the closer we got to Jimmy's, the more that tarp looked like it was covering something I didn't want to see. I did, and I didn't. My curiosity was telling me to rip back the blue corner fold and stare at what was hiding there, but that acid smell kept warning me that I didn't want to see it.

Should have, I guess. Might have made things easier.

I thought I saw it move a little once, but knew that had to be my imagination. But still, that acid smell was really bugging me. It was totally familiar, but I couldn't tell from what. Man, it made me think of Jimmy, and that was good. But it made my stomach turn over a couple of times too.

It got me so bad that as we pulled up to Jimmy's driveway, I couldn't wait to escape the truckbed. I was in my crouch again, getting ready to ditch over the side, but Josh didn't stop. He

just slowed down, cruised past and looked over, and revved the engine to go again.

I grabbed the six-pack and threw it out, then started heading over the side myself, but my jeans got tangled in one of the loose bungees. I yanked, but it just seemed to get tighter. Finally, I shook free and vaulted over, rolled about three times and landed in a heap, then looked up just in time to see the pick-up bend out of sight around the curve.

It didn't hardly hurt, but I was shaking like a cold dog. At last I got up, wiped some snot off my lip, and stumbled back towards Jimmy's.

On the way, I found my dented six. Two beers were gone, and one was leaking all over the grass on the side of the road. I popped one of the survivors, and half of it sprayed all over the place, but I swigged the rest down. It was flat, but it felt proper to toss the empty can, and I got rid of the other two real quick.

When I finally got to the driveway, I stood there for a while taking it in. Jimmy's house was never much to look at. He didn't much know how a lawnmower worked. But I was staring at a charred pile of wood. It had been burned to the ground, hard to

tell how long ago, but that's the first time that night I smelled the smoke.

And something else. That acid smell again. The one from under the tarp. Couldn't shake it off now, even though the pick-up was gone.

That tarp. Something about it kept chewing at me. I saw the silver shadows from the truckbed in my mind. There were the jumper cables, the batteries (no, not exactly that kind of acid), and the come-along. The stupid jean-clawing bungees, the gas can, the stray wood-chip.

That wood chip. Only it wasn't a wood-chip, was it? No, it had a more regular rectangular shape. It hit me. It was that stupid lighter I'd given to Sara, the one with the Schnauzer on it, and all of a sudden I knew what was under the tarp.

Now, I was scared. I tried to think where Josh would be taking the truck, and guessed it might be up where the Twins kept their work trailer. If I went cross-country through the woods, I might still get there in time. That tarp had moved, right? Maybe?

I tore through the woods down the old snowmobile trail. The light wasn't bad with the moon, even under the edges of the trees, but I was wishing right away I hadn't had those beers. After about ten minutes, I had to stop and throw up behind a tree. That felt better, and I sprinted up to the point where I could see the trailer clearing somewhere up ahead of me.

I crept through the trees, trying to be careful not to make too much noise, and hoping beyond hope. And then I felt her, faint at first, and confused. She was up ahead, hurting, but alive.

I came up on the clearing. No truck, and Jake's El Camino wasn't there either, but the yard outside the trailer was lit up like daytime. With the moon, there wasn't any need for lights, but the halogen headlamps that Jake had duct-taped halfway up some old telephone poles around the yard were going full blast.

I scrambled down the embankment and over to the trailer. I stamped my boots out on the metal steps going up to the door, looked down to make sure I hadn't left any prints, and ducked inside to see if I could find a big wrench or something else to take care of Josh when he showed. I was looking around the little kitchen inside the door, when a movement on the black and white TV caught my eye. Black and white - these guys were

cheap. But then I absorbed it. Wasn't a TV. It was the monitor to a security camera.

I didn't recognize the location, but when something gleamed silver on the right side of the picture, I realized it was the moon shimmering off a big old backhoe. Those boys had their equipment parked somewhere at a construction site, and had rigged the camera to keep an eye out for dump-truck jackers and bulldozer thieves. And what I saw on it next definitely grabbed my eye.

Jake's El Camino was parked next to the backhoe, and Josh's pick-up was just pulling into the picture. Josh walked around back, picked up the bundle in the tarp, and stumbled over toward the backhoe. He dumped the tarp on the ground and stood up, panting. Then he went back for a second trip, and tossed the come-along, the jumper cables, and a battery next to the tarp.

A spark of recognition went off in my head. Something about that equipment gave off pure malevolence. I had to get to her. I had to find a way to help her. But where were they? And how could I reach them in time without a car? I searched every inch of the screen, looking for a clue.

Jake was throwing his arms all over and just about jumping up and down. Josh was giving it back to him, pointing at the tarp and then back down the road. Jake gave a "Well, go ahead" look, and then Josh pulled off the tarp.

It was Sara.

Her feet were bound with that same stupid duct tape (was it blue, like the tarp? No way to tell in black and white but I knew it was) that the boys had used to put up their halogen lamps. Her mouth was covered with another piece. Her wrists and hands were wrapped almost completely.

She was hurting. I could feel it. Dull, and maybe more emotional trauma than physical pain, embarrassment maybe at letting them do this to her. I wanted so much to be with her.

Jake was standing there in his coveralls, staring at her, looking her up and down. He still held his key chain in one hand, swinging it around, and something white stuck out of his vest pocket. You could see the light catch the one earring every once in a while when he tilted his head. I knew he had some nasty thoughts running through that brain of his as he

stared at my sister, and at that moment all I wanted to do was choke the life out of his three hundred pound body.

Josh turned and went back toward his truck. Jake picked up Sara and slapped her across the face. It was as if I felt the sting myself. My nerves were jangling like a five-alarm call to the firehouse, but, again, no place to go to. And then I felt the connection.

Sara looked sleepy, out of it.

"Wake up!," I screamed in my head. "Bite him. Kick him. Do something."

But the pulse that came through to me wasn't sleepy, or scared. Alert and alive, and completely unafraid. I think she sensed me watching. Does that sound strange? Maybe, but if it helped, I'll believe it.

Jake came over, leaned right into her. I was sure his stinking breath was hot on her face. Was that drool leaking down out of the corner of his mouth? No way to tell. The screen was too small. Still, I was sure that's what it was.

There, though. What was that? Sara's taped-up hand had just a thumb, one opposable thumb, sticking out of the mass of tape, and it held something. Something that if I hadn't known better would have looked like a small wood chip.

Jake pursed his lips and got ready to kiss her. He actually closed his eyes, the big romantic ox. But as he did, she clicked the wheel on the lighter, and it popped into flame. She lit the white thing hanging from Jake's pocket, and I realized it was an oily old rag, just like the one Dad always carried when he worked on the car. It leapt into orange life. With shocking speed and strength, Sara dipped a shoulder, and hit him with it square in the chest.

Jake's eyes practically jumped open, and he stared down at his now flaming shirt. He skittered back as if to get away from it, and too late realized he was on the edge of the hole. He teetered on the brink for a second, trying to find his balance. He almost had it at one point.

But Sara was too strong. I had never seen her so angry. She looked straight into his eyes, and I swear, it was her pure force of will that finally sent him over, and he plunged into the hole.

Even though the camera had no sound with it, I heard, no, felt him hit bottom.

Sara hopped over to the edge of the pit and looked down into it. She half-dropped, half-threw the lighter in, as much as she could with her hands bound like that, and I watched smoke drift out of the hole. There. There it was again, that acid smell, and I felt sick to my stomach.

No time though. There she was, looking down at Jake, and over her shoulder I saw Josh, creeping up on her.

Again, I tried to scream a warning to her in my head. She didn't move. Just stood there.

Sara! Please Sara! Turn around. See him.

And once again, back came to me "Don't worry. I'm fine."

In a few seconds, I saw why.

Josh pounced at her. I hadn't heard a thing, but he must have crunched some gravel or something under his feet, because just

as he came at her, she kind of jumped or fell to her right. He got one hand on her and kind of spun her a little, but his momentum was too much, and he fell straight past her down into the hole with his brother.

She swung her legs around underneath her, and got up from where she had fallen. As before, she stared down into the hole. Once more I yelled, this time out loud. "Get out of there, before they get back up."

Still, she stood there for what must have been sixty seconds, and finally baby-stepped over to the equipment still on the ground and freed herself. She was casual, almost what, happy? No, not exactly. Satisfied. Triumphant. The way she looked every time she'd done a ribbon-cutting or showed off pictures of her construction work. Completed. Eventually, she got in the black pick-up, and drove off.

Shaking, I kept staring at the screen, and then saw it. Why hadn't I before? Because the pick-up had been blocking it out. There, just to the right of the backhoe, I could see the screen for the old drive-in silhouetted against the sky, backlit by the glow of a dozen halogen headlamps.

She had been no more than a quarter mile down the road from the trailer the whole time. I burst out the door, tripped on the steps, and fell headlong onto a pile of loose paving stones. I pulled myself up, and limped down the driveway.

Three minutes later, I was standing next to the backhoe, looking down into the same hole that Sara had.

I understood now why she hadn't been worried. Jake had dug the hole deep. He didn't want the evidence of his crime too near the surface. At the bottom of the hole was a mush of something gray and watery and fresh, that had just been poured from another truck that had been just outside the range of the security camera picture - the cement mixer.

Jake's head was visible, but that was all. It was covered in a mixture of gray cement paste, and his eyes bulged out looking up at the night sky. His face was made completely silver by that haunted moon.

I couldn't see Josh at all, just the merest bristle of Brillo-Pad poked through the cement. Guess it wouldn't be jumping off his head anytime soon. No, these boys wouldn't be bothering anyone ever again.

Then I smelled the smoke again, and finally recognized it. My memories came flooding back and in that instant I knew exactly what had happened, and where I had smelled that dark and acid smell before.

It was the putrid scent of Jake's own charred flesh.

Now I remembered waking up in Jimmy's house, strapped to a chair, head aching, blood over one eye, and looking at him tied up with the same blue duct tape that I was bound with. I remembered what they did with the come-along and the jumper cables. Poor Jimmy.

I remembered the smell of the gasoline being poured, and the sulfur of a struck match. I remember thinking that I had been the lucky one.

I remembered everything that had happened as they had tortured Jimmy, and as they had left me to burn, right next to Jimmy's crappy little coffee table.

I remembered how Sara, sweet Sara, had wept for us at the funeral, aching. How she had so calmly stood up to them, had

made sure that they wouldn't hurt anyone else. And finally, how as she had driven away, she had emitted some measure of peace.

I knew she'd be OK now. She'd evened things out. She'd miss me, but she'd won her victory.

Somehow, she'd get Dad through it too. Much as I hated to admit it, he'd miss me as bad as she would. But Sara knew how to heal people. She and Dad would get by.

I looked down at the ground. There, next to the blue tarp, was Jake's last cheesy cigar, still smoldering. Out of it came one last puff. A tiny white cloud floated up toward the silver moon. A cloud that was the same thing that I was.

Smoke.