

Road Kiln

The headlights didn't help, not at six o'clock and through a foggy-cold winter's morning.

He tried to stop, to swerve, to miss, but it was no use: the loud thumping underneath the car told the story. He paused, foot off the accelerator, mentally shrugged off the cat as probably dead anyway, and drove on. The flash of white had been too fast for any effective evasive action.

Serves it bloody right, he thought. Should've looked where it was going – dumb fucking cat. He drove on, dismissing the incident, but lifted his foot again. A cautionary thought intruded, invading his driving.

What if there's some damage to the car, or pieces of the animal stuck in the suspension somewhere? He frowned. And shit everywhere?

He shook his head, lowered his foot. The car surged, wheels spun for a moment on the slick blacktop. He backed off, settled down and turned on the radio.

Don't be stupid.

But as he hit SEEK on the radio, he paused again. Another thought.

What if it *wasn't* a cat? The car slowed as he chewed his lower lip. Okay, it was a dog, or some other animal. Fuck it. Just fuck it. He accelerated once more, still chewing, thinking.

The worst.

What if a kid? Some little kid goofing off early? The flash of white could've been blonde hair, of a three or four year old, shit.

He slowed the car, came to a stop at the curb, engine running. He looked into the dreadful dark, now with a hint of morning glory as his mind rebelled.

That's crazy – why would a kid be running around so early? Kids can't run *that* fast, anyway, can they. *Can* they?

He stopped the engine, lowered the window glass, and listened. The cold air swirled around his head; his breath clouded

before his eyes. For a minute he sat, still, and strained his ears: nothing. Only the occasional noise of a truck or car somewhere close. Another train whining away from the station. And no sirens.

He was still close enough to *that* street to know.

Thank Christ!

He wiped his brow, now frigid with evaporating sweat. He closed the window, moved back onto the road and tried to think of something else as he drove home. Despite the continuous distraction of radio news though, he was still thinking about the white blur as he carefully drove into the garage, locked the car and went in the back door of the house.

Is that you?

He didn't answer, hung up the car keys, went to the coffee pot and poured out the first of fifteen or so cups he'd drink that day, as he did almost every day. As he sipped, her head showed around the door jamb.

Didn't you hear? He arched an eyebrow and nodded. She entered. Then why don't you answer? Why not? She looked at him. Oh, I see – you're pissed off. She stepped forward. What? Did Roxy get on your goat or something? Again? He rolled his eyes, took some more coffee. Well, talk to me! For *fuck's* sake.

She got on the train fine. She – we – weren't late. No worries. He fumbled for a cigarette, patted his pockets. Where's my....

Here! You left them on the hall table when you took off. In so much of a hurry. She threw the packet.

He caught it, pulled one out, lit up and gratefully filled his lungs with the hundreds of noxious gases that tasted like heaven's grave. Slowly, almost reverently, he exhaled, relaxed against the kitchen sink, and took another sip.

Ran over a cat. Or a dog. Not sure. Too dark to see. He shrugged, inhaled again, flicked ash into the sink, over his shoulder.

I wish you wouldn't do that. She glared at his eyes, at his cigarette, then back to his impassive face. You drive too fast anyway. Always have, yer bugger.

That was true; he knew that. With a license for forty years ago, he'd been in plenty trouble with speeding, copping more than his fair share of fines.

He made a face, pulling the corners of his mouth down into an inverted U and glared back at her, eyes narrowing. Fuck off. I drive how I want. His voice growled. Only a damn cat anyway. Who cares?

Maybe the cat's owner, *yer fucker*. She cocked her head to one side, put her hands on her hips – a typical pose she'd adopt when she wanted him to do something. He hated it. She knew that. Well – how d'yer know it's a cat, anyway, or dog? She tossed her hair back, her anger showing as the tip of her nose reddened. Anyway, what sort of bloke runs over a dumb animal and just drives away, eh? Eh!

He watched as her cheeks now also started to crimson.

Christ – just shut it – just shut the fuck up, will ya! He grinned with his tongue hanging out, a sudden transformation of his face that could have been insolent if it wasn't so lecherous. What sort of bloke? One who loves ya, *dearie!* The smile disappeared, his brow furrowed. He deliberately blew smoke towards her. He looked at his watch: getting on for seven.

He reached into the frig, grabbed the milk jug, threw some cereal into a bowl, poured out a good measure of milk until everything swum, added too much sugar, picked up a spoon and tucked in. He looked at her looking at him, his mouth so full the milk dribbled down his chin. He wiped it then spoke.

Just a *fucking* cat. C'mon, forget about it. The words were thick, muffled and almost pleading. Make some toast for me?

He dropped his gaze to the cereal bowl, looked up, smiled a ghost that was gone all too quickly. She looked away, out the window, then got the sliced bread, put two pieces into the toaster and waited, arms folded. He shoveled the cereal in, slurped up the milk and watched her. The toaster popped. Swiftly, she applied margarine to the hot bread, got a plate, shoved it with the burnt offering to him. She poured another coffee, pushed it towards him.

Will you go back and check?

He finished the cereal, quartered the toast and began eating each piece, adding some honey before he did. Aww, leave off, will ya! Sometimes, he caught the dripping honey on his tongue before it hit the plate, licked around the toast and shoved it all in, one by one. When he'd finished, he sat back and lit another cigarette.

I said, will you go *back*!

I heard you. He sipped his coffee, staring at her and smoking, slowly. After another five minutes, he stood, pushed back the chair, went to the sink and ground out the cigarette on the stainless steel edge, then put the cup in the sink.

Just gonna have a look at the car, make sure there's no damage. She didn't answer, went to the window, her eyes bright and wide and watched as he went back to the garage.

He backed the car out onto the driveway, cut the engine, popped the bonnet catch, got out and closely examined the front and both sides first. Then he lifted the bonnet and let his eyes search the whole compartment.

Whatcha lookin' for?

He turned, saw his neighbour, Nick, standing at the edge of his property. He shrugged. Ran over some kinda animal, coming back from the station earlier. He dropped the bonnet as Nick approached.

Anything busted?

Nope. Looks okay. No blood, no bits of fur stuck anywhere I can see. He flicked his butt away, towards the road. It landed on Nick's lawn. Best of all, no damage to the car.

Is it dead?

How should I know? Didn't stop. Well, not to do any searching, anyway.

Must've been alright, you reckon?

S'pose so. He lit another cigarette. Just a cunt of a cat, anyway.

Yeah, just a fucking cat. Nick touched his face, near the patch over his eye. Gotta go and get my dressing changed by the doc this morning.

Oh yeah? He leaned back on the mudguard, blowing smoke towards Nick. It drifted away in the limpid air. Getting better?

No worries. Nick squinted with his good eye. But, I'll be glad when I get rid of it. A fucking pain trying to drive one-eyed, I can tell you! He touched the patch again, gingerly. Cataract. Cunt of a thing.

Yeah, well, she'll be right. It all takes time. He paused. Need a lift to the doc?

Nah! She'll be right. I can mangle. No worries. But, thanks, anyway.

He shrugged. Well, I might as well give the old girl a wash, eh? Now that it's on the driveway.

Good idea. Nick watched as he started to pull at a hose hanging at the side of the garage. Didja hear about the big accident last night?

Nope. He turned on the tap and began spraying the car. What happened?

Another bunch of young kids, hooligans, smashed into another. Five of *them* killed. The old couple in the other car also copped it. In Redcliffe, for *fuck's* sake. He shook his head and worried his eye patch again. What's a bunch of yobbos doing *there*, burning up roads? He shrugged. Serves 'em right, anyway, young punks.

Fuck me dead! Seven! He grimaced as he moved the nozzle. The spray danced off the car, creating a mini rainbow in the still rising sun.

Yeah, that's what I said. The wife was upset just awful, mate. Another reason why she doesn't like me driving, even just around town. He touched his patch. Cunt of a thing.

Well, that's life. And death, eh? It's death in life, right? He chuckled grimly as he directed the water skimming across the body.

Yeah I reckon. Nick looked back to his house. The wife. Gotta go. See ya later.

No worries, Nick. He didn't bother turning, waving his hand as he continued spraying for another few minutes, cut the water flow at the nozzle and then turned off the tap. He flushed out the hose, rolled it back neatly, wiped his hands on his jeans, lit

another cigarette and looked at the car, gleaming with its diamond-like sparkles. Finally, he grunted with satisfaction and went back indoors.

What'd Old Nick want?

He's not *that* old, y'know, it's just his long white hair. Those local kids are just fucking cruel, y'know. He ground out his cigarette in the sink and flushed it down.

Who cares? So what did ... *Nick* want?

Nothing. Just asking about me looking at the car. Told him about the cat. He poured more coffee.

So?

So, nothing. No damage. No blood. No nothing, okay!

But aren't you going to check? Back where you hit it?

What the *fuck* for? He kept his voice calm, with effort, edging his tone with tiredness. He pulled out another cigarette, lit up. He blew smoke to the ceiling where it hung and spread. No damage, no blood, it's *obviously* okay, dog, cat, whatever.

You don't know for sure *what* it was. She glared at him, nostrils flared. You have to be sure.

For a full minute, he stood there silent, smoking and sipping his coffee while the eye contest raged. Finally, he shrugged, still looking at her. Okay, if there's nothing there, will you shut the fuck up about it?

She looked away. Yes. Do it. For me. Please.

He sighed. Okay, *okay*. He threw the barely used cigarette into the sink and gulped the last of his coffee, went to the door and turned. Remember, not another word, okay?

She looked at him and nodded.

As he drove away, he muttered: Well, at least the wind will get rid of the remaining water. He waved to Nick as he saw him and his wife getting into their car, made the left turn at the end of the road and headed back to where it had happened.

At the top of the short road that terminated near the station, he parked the car, got out, locked it and began walking along the footpath close to the edge, searching both sides for any tell-tale signs. It wasn't busy, being still well before opening times; but it would be, later, with the various businesses and local tenements on it. He walked slowly, letting his eyes scan every square metre of the road surface, down to the next corner: nothing, not a shred of cat or evidence of any blood or mangled remains of anything.

One fucking lucky cat, for sure.

He stood at that corner and looked to his left, back up the road trying to identify the spot where he'd felt the impact. His car at the other end gleamed in the sunlight. He smiled, lit another cigarette and stood thinking, for a few moments; then took out his mobile phone, thumbed in the numbers, put it to his ear as it connected, oblivious to the car approaching from behind him, as he stood at the T-junction. The car was about fifty metres from him, increasing speed.

The car hesitated, then the left turn indicator light blinked on and on and on. The driver, a white-haired man, was looking at shop fronts, gesticulating to his passenger, a woman who was obviously shouting at the driver.

Phone still at his ear, the man stepped off the curb, still looking to his left as he heard her voice.

Hey, babe, no worries, that was one fucking *lucky*...

The car hit him square on as it lurched, too fast, around the corner, crushing his right hip while lifting him up to crash heavily upon the bonnet, thrusting his head through the windscreen. The phone, leaving his hand at the moment of impact, performed a myriad of tumble turns, finally slapping down and screen up, upon the still dewy-wet grass of the footpath. As screams erupted and the car screeched to a halt, inertia shot him forward, now unconscious, causing him to tumble through half a circle to land full upon his head, breaking it open like a ripe watermelon. Blood and brains scattered in a spray of crimson-streaked grayness.

The teenage boy, hearing the noise, stuffed the remaining scrambled eggs into his mouth and, still chomping on his last piece of toast, rushed to the front of the house. As he ran, he shouted incoherently: Hey, Mum! A fender-bender. Food fell onto the floor and then onto the footpath where he stopped near the mobile phone, taking in the carnage: a sizzling car with broken grill and shattered windscreen, a crumpled body with a spreading pool of blood at its head, a white-haired man with a torn eye patch now staggering around the road screaming, sobbing, pulling at his hair and mouthing obscenities at an old woman bleeding from a jagged cut on her face.

The last of the toast dropped from the boy's mouth, agape, his face now ashen.

What's going on? What's happened? Are you there? What's all the fucking *noise*?

The boy looked down, saw the phone, and looked again at the bloody scene. His mother, a slow moving obesity, wheezed up to her son's side as he bent to pick up the phone.

Is that damn cat all right? Tell me, I wanna know, fuck you! Why don't you answer me, you *fucker*...

The boy and the woman looked at each other, blankly, as he handed the phone to her.

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