

The Dying Hour

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Extract

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1

Karen Harding had to get away.

She was alone, driving from Seattle north on Interstate 5, wipers slapping at the rain as she tried to understand why her fiancé was suddenly forcing her to make a life-changing decision.

Karen brushed her tears away.

Why was he doing this? Luke's change of heart had staggered her. She needed to leave for a few days. To think. After they had spoken she threw some things into a bag, tossed it into her Toyota, and set off to see her big sister, Marlene, who lived in Vancouver. Karen didn't bother calling ahead. This was an emergency. Besides, Marlene would be home. She and her husband rarely left town because of their two kids and their jobs.

The air horn of a Freightliner yanked Karen's attention back to the highway. Her windshield was a watery curtain. Lights from oncoming traffic stabbed at her from the darkness. Big rigs trailed blinding spray as they passed, their wakes nearly swamping her.

Time for a break.

She exited at a truck stop outside Bellingham. A massive map of Washington and British Columbia covered the lobby wall. Below it, a corkboard papered with ads for trucks, bonding agents, and driving jobs. Faces of missing children, women, and fugitive men stared at her from posters. Video games beeped and ponged next to the soda and snack machines.

She was hungry.

In the restaurant, country music mingled with the aroma of deep-fried food and coffee and the clink of cutlery. Amid the murmur of weary men in ball-caps, plaid shirts, and jeans, Karen searched for a seat.

She walked by a woman and a young girl laughing over ice cream, a white-haired couple sharing soft conversation over soup, then a bearded man who wore dark glasses and the white collar of a reverend. He was sitting alone reading a book and sipping coffee. She found a booth by the window and ordered a chicken sandwich.

Wind-driven rain bled against the glass. The truck stop's electrical power surged; the lights flickered. Karen glanced around the diner. The reverend was watching her. He offered a warm smile. Karen tried smiling but looked away.

She ached to talk to her sister, to someone who might offer guidance. Maybe the reverend being there was a sign. Perhaps she could talk to him. Could she confide her dilemma to a stranger? She looked to his booth but he was gone.

Karen noticed the tip left by his coffee cup as the din in the diner grew louder. Those who were on cell

phones began alerting others to trouble arising from the storm, a wreck at the border crossing near Blaine.

“A reefer and a loaded tanker,” one of them said. “Going to push your wait time way, way back. A couple of hours.”

Not good.

Karen needed to reach her sister tonight. She looked at her folded map for an alternative entry into Canada. She’d always crossed at Blaine. She examined the web of roads in Washington’s northwest corner. Lynden looked easy enough. Exit northbound on Route 539 at the north end of Bellingham, straight shot to the border. If Lynden was choked, she’d try Sumas.

The storm was unrelenting.

Karen couldn’t see much. Gusts rattled her Toyota. She tightened her grip, questioned her sanity, and considered returning to her apartment in Seattle. Or at least finding a motel for the night.

No.

She estimated that she could be at Marlene’s home in less than two hours if she was cautious.

But this route made her uneasy. She saw fewer towns, buildings, houses, lights. She pressed on, unable to see the streams, the forested foothills, or the slopes of the Cascade Mountains. But they were out there. Veiled by darkness. As she drove deeper into it, Karen felt alone. Vulnerable. As if she were being swallowed. She switched on her radio to find a jazz station to help her relax.

A warning light began blinking. The low-fuel indicator.

How could that be? It made no sense. She had filled up at the truck stop. Maybe it was faulty? All right. She'd stop at the next gas station. Just to be safe. But there was nothing out there except the wind, the rain, and the night. She kept driving. After a few more miles, more warning lights began flashing. Engine. Oil. Her car began vibrating. The motor sputtered, then began bucking. Karen was jolted.

"Dear Lord."

She pulled over, switched off the ignition, and took a deep breath. *Be calm. Wait ten minutes, start the car, and drive slowly to the nearest gas station.* Ten minutes passed. Karen turned the key. Nothing.

She tried again.

Nothing.

Take it easy. She fished through her bag for her cell phone and address book. She'd call the auto club. But the familiar silver shape of her phone failed to emerge. It had to be there. Karen dumped the contents of her bag on the passenger seat, feeling her stomach tighten. In her hurry to leave Seattle she had forgotten her phone. It was in her apartment. Charging on her kitchen counter.

She closed her eyes. Inhaled, then exhaled slowly. Rain hammered on her car as the wind rocked it. She tried starting it again. Nothing. She reached for the manual and flipped through it, knowing it was futile. She knew nothing about cars.

Karen had no choice, she had to try something. She reached for the hood release. She found her penlight and umbrella. Maybe the trouble was obvious. She got out and a violent gust snapped her umbrella, tearing the cloth, exposing the frame's prongs, like the ribs of an eviscerated animal.

Karen managed to raise the hood. Her tiny light came to life and she probed an alien world of wires, metal, rubber, hoses, and plastic reservoirs with colored fluids. Maybe something had come loose. Right. How would she know? As she reached into the engine to test a cable the road began glowing in intense white light. The hissing rain yielded to a growing roar as a line of several big trucks thundered by, throwing waves of spray that drenched her.

Furious, Karen retreated into her car.

She tossed her twisted umbrella into the backseat, then grabbed the wheel to steady herself. Soaked to her bones, she began shivering. *Don't panic. Think of a plan. Stay in the car. Change into dry clothes.* Maybe a patrol car or Samaritan would stop and call a tow truck or something. If not, she could spend the night in her Toyota. It wasn't too cold. She had a blanket. In the morning, she'd start walking. The next town couldn't be far.

She reached for her clothes bag and stopped. Two white circles blossomed in her rearview mirror. A vehicle had pulled onto the shoulder and was approaching. The lights grew brighter as it crept closer, coming to a stop a few yards behind her. It looked like an RV.

Someone was going to help her.

A door opened on the RV's passenger side and a figure stepped out. A man. Wearing a long overcoat and a hat. He stood at the rear bumper of Karen's car, silhouetted in the glare of his high beams and the curtain of rain. Hope fluttered in her stomach. She wiped her hands across her face and smoothed her wet hair as his shadow crossed the light.

The first thing she noticed at her door was a white collar, and then she recognized the beard and ball cap of the reverend from the truck stop. Relieved, she lowered her window about ten inches.

"Your car giving you trouble, miss?"

Karen hesitated. She couldn't see his face. His voice was grating, a rough whisper.

"Yes, it quit and won't start."

"Is anyone coming to help you?"

"No."

"Let me take a look."

The reverend switched on a flashlight and walked to the front. The hood was still raised. Karen felt him pulling and tapping as he inspected the motor.

"Try starting it now!"

She turned the key. Nothing happened. The front end dipped as he pressed hard on something.

"Again."

Nothing. He closed the hood, returned to the window.

"Smells like something's burned out on you. Could be anything. I've got a phone in my motor home. I can call a service truck for you, if you like."

“Yes, please. Oh, wait.” She turned to the passenger seat, sifted through the contents emptied from her bag. “I’m a member of the auto club. Here’s their card with the toll-free line.”

“Goodness.” He swept his flashlight from the card to Karen. “You’re sopping wet.”

“I tried fixing it myself.”

“I can see that. You shouldn’t sit here and risk catching cold. You’re welcome to wait in the RV until they come.”

Karen weighed his offer. He seemed kind. He was a clergyman. She had considered approaching him at the truck stop to talk. Rain poured from his hat as he waited.

“You’re a Christian, aren’t you, Karen?”

She caught her breath.

“How did you know that, and my name?”

The hat tipped to her club card.

“Your name’s on your card here and I noticed you have an *Ichthus* bumper sticker, the fish symbol for Jesus.”

“Oh, right.” She nodded. “Of course.”

“I saw you in the restaurant near Bellingham. You looked troubled.”

Karen was half smiling in amazement as she reflected on everything that had happened to her today. She had prayed for help. Was this a sign? A reverend finding her adrift in her personal storm? Was it all part of a master plan?

She collected her things, then followed the reverend

to his vehicle. He opened the door. A few small papers swirled from the RV and fluttered into the night before Karen stepped inside.

2

Len Tolba, a deputy sheriff with Sawridge County, took another hit of coffee and looked toward the morning sun washing over the mountains as he rolled his four-by-four past Laurel, northbound on 539.

Hell of a storm last night.

Top of his shift and he was heading for Lynden to investigate a complaint of local teens who had spray-painted obscenities at the Pioneer Museum.

Tolba shrugged off his frustration.

He was twenty-nine years old and had put in five years with the highway patrol. Not that there was anything wrong with what he was doing. No, sir. Not at all. He enjoyed it and was grateful to serve. But he had more to offer.

Tolba wanted to make detective.

He'd taken courses, studied, saved his comp time to take more classes, and attend seminars out of state. He was ready. On his passenger seat was a well-thumbed copy of the latest homicide investigators' textbook. He'd read it so many times he could damn near recite

entire chapters. Still, he knew the only way to be good at a thing was to do it.

Now, rumors were going around that council was going to approve the department's budget to expand the detective division. Tolba figured this would be his chance.

Major crimes happened around here. They got their share of homicides, sex crimes, and arsons, that's for sure. The population was under two hundred and fifty thousand, but a lot of traffic moved through the county. Sawridge was located in Washington's northwest corner, covering 2,120 square miles stretching from Okanagan County in the east, to the Strait of Georgia in the west. From Skagit County on the south, to the Canadian border on the north. It also encompassed some of the most remote regions in America.

Some of it still wild.

Tolba took another sip of coffee and his radio crackled with a call.

"What's your twenty, Len?"

"North on 539, about three or four clicks north of Laurel."

"Got a report of a breakdown or abandoned vehicle. Toyota. Blue. Washington registration. Ready to copy?"

His dispatcher recited the plate number, then put it on his computer.

"Trucker out of Bellingham said he saw it there last night and this morning. He puts it seven miles north of Laurel."

“Likely a breakdown from the storm. I should be coming up on it. There. I see it.”

The Toyota sat on a lonely stretch of road that sliced through rolling forests of cedar, hemlock, and Douglas fir. He turned on his emergency lights as he eased up on it.

First things first.

Tolba began typing on his computer keyboard, requesting checks for warrants, theft reports, and information on the owner. His query came back showing nothing outstanding. The car was registered to Karen Katherine Harding of Seattle. Twenty-four years old, according to her date of birth. White female. Brown hair. Blue eyes. Five feet three inches. One hundred ten pounds.

The computer beeped. Karen’s driver’s license picture appeared on Tolba’s screen. Pretty, he thought, peering at her face for a moment before grabbing his clipboard. He checked to ensure that he had an impound notice before getting out to tag the Toyota.

As Tolba closed his door he saw an enormous crow approaching from a treetop. Gliding so near above him as it did, he heard the beat of its wings, the silky whoosh of its black feathers, saw its beak open to release a *squawk-caw* before it vanished somewhere over the forest. Tolba pulled his attention back to the Toyota.

Let’s check it out first, test your detective powers of observation, he kidded himself. He noticed the Jesus fish bumper sticker. The student parking sticker for a Seattle college. The car appeared to be well kept and

in good condition. No flat tires. Nothing leaking. The rear seat had a travel bag and an umbrella.

Tolba paused to consider the umbrella.

It was in bad shape, like it had been destroyed in last night's storm, then tossed in the back. His attention moved from the back to the front seat. Now this was strange.

The keys were still in the ignition.

The door was unlocked.

He checked the highway's shoulder, walking thirty, maybe forty yards in each direction.

Nothing.

He went back to his four-by-four and reached for his radio.

3

Just over a hundred miles south in Seattle, Trudy Moore heard activity in the apartment above hers.

Sounded like Karen was back, she thought, glancing at the time while getting ready to put in a morning shift at the coffee shop a few blocks away. This was Trudy's busy day because she had three afternoon classes.

After washing her breakfast dishes and tidying up, she filled a watering can to tend to her plants, reminding herself how lucky she was to live in this gorgeous building in Capitol Hill.

It was a classic stone apartment house built around 1910. Her place was a second-story one bedroom with hardwood floors and bay windows overlooking downtown, the Space Needle and the Olympic Mountains to the west. She had managed to get a terrific sublet deal through a friend.

A door slammed overhead, startling her.

Strange.

Trudy's apartment was identical to the one above her where Karen Harding lived. Both of them had

been tenants for close to a year and had become attuned to each other's living rhythms. Karen was as quiet as a church mouse, which was Trudy's nickname for her because Karen went to church every Sunday morning.

Karen would certainly never slam a door. Maybe the door handle slipped. Trudy resumed checking over her lecture notes, tapping her pen against her pages, until she heard footfalls. Heavier than she was used to. The floor creaked as though someone was walking throughout the entire apartment. Walking, *urgently*. Doors opening and closing.

What was going on? That didn't sound like Karen.

Trudy remembered hearing her leave last night. Heard her descend the stairs. From the window she'd seen Karen hurrying to her car and driving off in the rain. Afterward Karen's phone rang at least six times. Come to think of it, it started ringing again earlier this morning and went unanswered.

Trudy waved it all off. None of her business.

She glanced at the time, calculating how much she had to study before collecting her books, getting on her bike, and riding to the coffee shop.

Karen's phone started ringing again.

This time someone upstairs picked it up and Trudy heard the faint sound of someone talking. More footsteps, a door opened, thudded closed. Then the hall stairs creaked as someone quickly descended them.

Trudy heard the rush of a person passing by her door. A big person.

That is definitely not Karen.

Trudy was absolutely certain because she was staring at Karen's parking space and her car was still not there.

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