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cold kiss

JOHN RECTOR



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Freezing was not so bad as people thought.
There were lots worse ways to die.

—Jack London

Part I

1

It was just starting to snow when we pulled off the highway and into the parking lot of the Red Oak Tavern.

There was nothing special to the place, a couple of gas pumps out front and a neon open sign buzzing its welcome behind dirty glass. The inside was clean and warm and smelled like grease and onions, and by the time the waitress brought our coffee, I'd managed to shake the road out of my head and was beginning to feel alive again.

We sat for a while, not saying much, drinking our coffee. We were the only ones inside except for a man whispering into a pay phone on the other side of the lunch counter. I don't think we would've noticed him at all if it wasn't for his cough. The sound, wet and choking, was hard to ignore.

I did my best.

Sara didn't.

"My grandfather had a cough like that," she said. "Right before he died. It was terrible."

"It doesn't sound good."

“When he got real bad, he’d cough and spray blood and mucus all over everything, his clothes, the furniture, the walls, everything.” She sipped her coffee. “Do you know what it’s like having to pick scabs out of your hair at night because someone coughed blood on you?”

I told her I didn’t.

“It’s not fun, believe me.”

“Probably worse for him.”

Sara looked at me then nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. It was terrible for him.” She reached for the sugar and opened three packets into her coffee then tossed the empties on the growing stack in the ashtray. “People understood and I don’t think anyone blamed him in the end, considering how much pain he was in and all.”

“Blamed him?”

“For killing himself.” She took another sip of the coffee and frowned. “You know, they say decaf tastes the same, but it doesn’t. I can tell the difference.”

“You never told me about that.”

“About what?”

“Your grandfather killing himself.”

“The cancer would’ve got him anyway,” she said. “He knew the longer he stuck around the more the insurance companies would’ve tried to screw him. I might’ve done the same thing if I was him.”

“Not me.”

“You’re not in that situation, so you don’t know.”

I started to argue then felt a dull wave of pain build behind my eyes. I looked down and pressed my fingers against the sides of my head.

"You okay?" Sara asked.

I told her I was.

"Your head?"

I nodded.

"Do you have your pills?"

"Took them already," I said. "It'll pass."

"I can drive some, if you want."

"I'll be fine. Finish your story."

"Not much to finish," Sara said. "It is what it is."

I sat back, and neither of us spoke for a long time.

The only other sound in the room was Hank Williams, far away and lonely, singing "Lovesick Blues" through hidden speakers in the ceiling. I wasn't a big fan of country music, but there was something about Hank Williams that always put me in a good mood.

Shame how he died.

A few minutes later, the man at the pay phone slammed the receiver down then walked to the lunch counter and sat on one of the stools. He coughed, then lifted a glass of water and drank. It didn't help, and he coughed again.

Each time he did, Sara winced.

"That poor man," she said. "He sounds awful."

I didn't say anything.

Behind me, the kitchen doors opened and our waitress came out carrying two plates stacked with food.

Sara smiled. "It's about time."

The waitress crossed the dining room and set the plates in front of us. She asked if we needed anything else. I told her we didn't, and she set a half-empty bottle of ketchup on the table then disappeared back into the kitchen.

I stared at my burger for a moment then closed my eyes. The pain in my head was fading, but the pills were making my stomach spin. I wasn't sure if I'd be able to eat, so I wanted to take my time.

Sara didn't wait. She pushed her dark hair behind her ears and reached for her burger. By the time I took my first bite, she was almost finished.

"Damn, I was starved," she said.

I agreed, and neither of us said much as we ate.

Eventually, my stomach settled, and when I started to slow down I set what was left of my burger on the plate and said, "So, how did he do it?"

The man at the counter wheezed and coughed.

"How'd who do what?"

"Your grandfather," I said. "How'd he kill himself?"

Sara frowned. "That's a little morbid."

"You don't have to tell me."

"I don't mind. I'm just teasing you." She licked the grease off her index finger and pointed it at the center of her chest and said, "Shotgun, right here. Big mess."

"You're kidding."

She shook her head then picked up a bundle of fries and ran them through a pool of salted ketchup on her plate and took a bite. "My daddy said he killed himself like a man, whatever that means. My grandma said it was because he wanted an open casket at his funeral. She said if he had a weakness, it was vanity."

"Do you miss him?"

"Not really," she said. "I was young, and the only memory I have is being outside with him in his tomato garden. Those vines

were so tall, they seemed to go up and up forever.” She looked down at her plate then picked up a few more fries. “That’s a good memory, I guess.”

I didn’t say anything else. Instead, I sat and watched her eat and tried to imagine her as a young girl standing in her grandfather’s tomato garden, safe and happy under a vaulted blue Minnesota sky.

Sara must’ve seen something in my eyes because she smiled then leaned across the table and kissed me long and soft.

Her lips tasted like fryer oil and salt.

“It’s okay, baby,” she said. “We all bounce till we break.”



Something shattered behind me and I turned.

The man at the counter was fumbling with the napkin dispenser and fighting to breathe. There was broken glass on the floor and water ran off the edge of the counter in thin streams.

The waitress came over with a dish towel and started picking up the broken glass. The man tried to speak, but every few words were broken by another long hacking string of coughs.

“You think he’s okay?” Sara asked.

I didn’t answer.

I watched him get up and reach for a green backpack on the stool next to him. He slid the strap over his shoulder then weaved his way through the empty tables toward the bathrooms in the back of the diner. He held a crumpled stack of napkins over his mouth as he walked.

“He needs a doctor,” Sara said.

“Looks that way.”

“You should go see if he’s okay.”

I ignored her and watched him until the men’s room door closed, then I picked up my burger and finished the last few bites. I could still hear the man coughing, but it was muffled and far away.

A few minutes later, the waitress came by and refilled our coffee.

Sara thanked her then said, “Is that guy okay?”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” the waitress said. “I’m just hoping he doesn’t die back there. I need to make it home to my kids before this storm hits.”

I looked out the window at the parking lot and saw our car, already covered with a thin layer of snow. The sky around it swirled thick and gray.

“How bad is it supposed to get?”

“How far you going?”

“Reno.”

The waitress clicked her tongue and said, “You might still get ahead of it if you hurry, but if I were you, I’d double back and head over to I-80.”

“Into the storm?” Sara shook her head. “This way is quicker.”

“Not if they close the road, it ain’t.” The waitress nodded toward the window. “The plows don’t make it back here until I-80 is clear. If this storm is as bad as they say, and they end up closing the highway, you might be out here for a while.”

Sara looked at me. Her eyes shone green under the plastic glare of the fluorescent lights. “What do you think?”

“What’s the quickest way to I-80?”

“About fifteen miles back,” the waitress said. “Maybe twenty.”

“That’s a long way,” Sara said. “It seems kinda crazy to turn around now, don’t you think?”

“Up to you guys,” the waitress said. “Who knows, you might be able to stay ahead of it. Maybe it’s not as bad as people are saying.”

Sara looked at me and shrugged.

I thanked the waitress then she took our plates and pushed the check across the table toward me. When she was gone, I looked out the window at the snow and the low rolling sky.

“I don’t want to go back to I-80, Nate. Do you?”

I shook my head. “It doesn’t look all that bad right now. I bet we can stay ahead of it.”

“Good.”

The man in the bathroom coughed again, harder this time, and I saw Sara tense across from me. She looked up and I knew what was coming.

“It’s not our business,” I said.

“He’s all alone out here, and he sounds really sick.”

“He’s a grown-up. He knows what’s best for him.”

“Please, Nate? Just go check on him.”

The last thing I wanted to do was talk to a complete stranger in the men’s bathroom at a roadside diner. I tried to explain this to her, but she didn’t get it. Instead, she looked at me in a way she had of looking at me, and I knew there was no point in arguing.

Besides, I’d had a few cups of coffee and we had a long drive ahead. I was going back there anyway.

I didn’t see how I could say no.

2

I was pissing on either Cat Stevens or Osama bin Laden, it was hard to tell. The photo on the urinal filter was old and faded and all I could see was the beard.

I decided it really didn't matter.

The man from the lunch counter was shuffling around in one of the stalls. He wasn't coughing like before, but I could hear him breathing. Obviously, he wasn't dead, so I didn't see the point in checking.

I zipped up and walked over to the sink. The light above the mirror was sharp and white and turned my reflection a cold gray. I stared into the glass and examined the dark circles under my eyes, then I reached for the faucet and stopped.

There was blood in the sink, and it was fresh.

I glanced back at the stall then grabbed a paper towel from a stack on the counter and used it to turn on the faucet. The soap dispenser was empty, so I ran my hands under the water for a long time. When I finished, I used another paper towel to shut the faucet off.

The man in the stall coughed.

I looked down at the blood, almost black under the cold white light, and thought about Sara's grandfather.

I wanted to leave.

I took a fresh paper towel and dried my hands then opened the door leading back into the diner. All I had to do was walk out, but something wouldn't let me go.

I stood there for a long time, trying to decide.

Eventually, I let the door close, then I walked back to the stall and knocked.

The movement inside stopped.

I waited for the man to say something. When he didn't, I said, "None of my business, but I wanted to see if you were okay. That cough sounds pretty bad."

Silence.

I stood, listening to the echo of the pipes behind the tile walls, then stepped away. I was about to leave when I heard the latch slide and saw the stall door inch open.

The man's face appeared, colorless and coated with sweat. He looked from me to the door then back.

"What did you say?"

I started to explain about Sara and how she'd asked me to check on him, but his eyes kept moving from me to the door, and I could tell he wasn't listening. Eventually, he turned and grabbed his backpack and slipped it over his shoulder then pushed past me toward the sink.

The man wasn't tall, but his shoulders were wide and strong. He had a thick pink scar that started on his neck then snaked down and disappeared under the back of his shirt.

I looked in the stall. There was blood on the toilet and the white tile floor, more than a little.

"We heard you coughing," I said. "We wanted to make sure you were—"

"Fuck."

The man slapped the empty soap dispenser with his palm, then again, this time hard enough to crack the plastic. He leaned forward on the counter and lowered his head. His shoulders sagged, and I could see them move with his breath. Eventually, he straightened and went back to rinsing his hands.

"Anyone else come in while I've been back here?"

I looked around the bathroom. I didn't know what he meant, and I stammered over my words.

"In the diner?" His voice was slow and harsh. "Has anyone else come in, sat down, ordered coffee, maybe a fucking sandwich?"

"No," I said. "No one else is out there."

The man leaned forward and splashed water on his face. When he looked up, I saw his reflection in the mirror.

Under that light, he was a corpse.

"That's good." He reached for the paper towels on the counter and ran them over his face and hands, watching me in the mirror. "What the hell happened to you?"

I didn't say anything.

The man smiled. "You look like you've been through the grinder."

I ignored him. "So, you going to be okay?"

The man shook his head, then laughed under his breath. "You her little errand boy?"

"What?"

“Your girl out there, the brunette.” He motioned toward the dining room. “She send you back here to check up on me?”

“We just thought—”

“Man, I bet you do everything she tells you to do, don’t you?” He paused. “I don’t blame you. I noticed her when you two walked in. She’s a tight little thing. And with the way you look, I can see why you want to keep her happy.”

I held up my hands. “Just trying to be friendly, that’s all.”

The man crumpled the paper towels and tossed them into the trash then turned and looked at me.

I fought the urge to step back.

“Well, don’t,” he said. “I don’t need new friends.”

“My mistake.”

“That’s right, it was, so when you report back to your girl out there, you tell her I’m fine and then you tell her to mind her own fucking business.”

He stared at me, and I did my best not to blink.

It didn’t work.

The man shouldered his backpack then brushed past me, out of the men’s room and into the diner.

I stood for a while, staring at the closed door, not sure what to do next. I told myself not to let it bother me, but I couldn’t help it. If that was what I got for trying to be nice, then lesson learned.

Before I left, I went back to the stall and took a closer look at all the blood on the floor. I didn’t know what was wrong with the guy, but it was obvious that pretty soon there was going to be one less asshole in the world.

That was good enough for me.

— — —

When I came out of the bathroom, the man was gone. Sara was sitting in the booth. She stared at me as I got closer, waiting.

"He's fine," I said.

"That's it?"

"What else do you want?" I picked up the check and said, "We still need gas. You ready to go?"

"Did he say anything at all?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know," she said. "Anything. He ran out of here in a hurry. You weren't nasty to him, were you?"

I looked out the window at the parking lot. There were one or two cars out there, but I didn't see him around any of them and that was just fine.

"I asked if he was okay, and he said he was."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

Sara stared at me. "You're not telling me something."

"I'm telling you what he said. Now we need to get going if we want to stay ahead of that storm, unless you want to spend the night in this diner."

Sara frowned then slid out of the booth and started back toward the bathrooms. "I'll meet you out front," she said. "But we're not through talking about this. You're hiding something from me, and I can tell. You're a shitty liar."

"I'm telling you the truth."

She didn't say anything else, just kept walking.

I stood at the table and watched her go.

Sara wasn't a beauty, at least not in a movie star sort of way, but watching her walk made me ache inside.

It was like watching something dirty.

Everything slid just right.

Once she was gone I counted out enough money to cover the bill and a small tip, then I dropped it on the table. I picked up my coffee cup and drank the last cold bit then stared out the window at the storm coming in over the empty fields lining the highway.

I thought again about turning back to I-80, but pushed the idea away. The storm was moving fast and I didn't want to take the chance of getting stuck. Our only option was to keep moving. We could still make it if we hurried.

As I was leaving, the waitress came out of the kitchen and thanked me. "You two be safe out there," she said.

I told her we'd try.