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*Cow Path Road*

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Though the pain had not hit him yet, Mad Dog could tell he was badly hurt. The steering wheel had crushed him against the driver's seat and blood oozed from his mouth with each labored breath. On the floorboard, under the passenger's seat, lay Bronto, muttering curses, his thin body grotesquely twisted, like an unstrung puppet, unable to move.

Mad Dog took stock of the situation. The sun was sinking behind the cliffs and the temperature dropping fast below freezing. But Mad Dog did not despair. The old man in the Chevy they had passed a few miles back should be coming up the road soon. He would see the wreck and stop, as the law required, and call for help. Surely he would have a cell phone and if by chance he didn't, he would drive back to town and alert the rescue squad. The 'Jesus Saves' sticker Mad Dog had seen on his rear bumper was especially reassuring.

So he sat still and waited, listening through Bronto's muttering and the moaning of the wind for the sound of the Chevy.

At one time, the only way by motor vehicle between Hebron and Rock City was across the mountain on Cow Path Road, so named because the engineers who laid out the road had conveniently followed the paths trodden by generations of cows from the dairy farms that had once served the two towns.

Between Hebron and Rock City the distance on the modern four lane highway along the foot of the mountain was considerably longer than by way of Cow Path Road. But the half hour or so saved by taking the winding, now crumbling, desolate road wasn't worth the trouble and risks involved, unless one happened to be in big hurry, as were the two young drifters that late Friday afternoon.

Mad Dog and Bronto, as they had nicknamed each other, had been high school classmates. At age 16, after a long history of suspensions for unruly behavior, they had dropped out of school and embarked on an aimless cross-country journey, working odd jobs to survive and, when no jobs were to be had, as was often the case, panhandling or shoplifting — skills at which they had become consummate experts.

The rickety old van they drove, a gift from Bronto's grandpa, had been their only home for the past two years. Its side compartments stuffed with clothing, mostly unwashed and, strewn on the floor amid empty soda cans, fast-food wrappers and other

assorted trash and their sleeping gear. Every couple of weeks, if they could afford it, they would pull up at a truck stop for a hot shower.

“It don’t get no better than this!” Mad Dog would exult, and Bronto, smiling blissfully, would nod in agreement.

At Hebron they had lucked out on a job with a fly-by-night contractor who specialized in conning elderly folks into making needless repairs in their homes. Attired in an official-looking uniform, a hard hat, a photo ID pinned on his lapel and bearing a clipboard, the conman would introduce himself as an inspector for a non-existent ‘Municipal Services’ agency and inform the homeowners that their waterline might be leaking.

Once inside the house, he would find things that needed fixing — the water heater, the furnace exhaust, loose insulation — and propose to make the necessary repairs at a reduced price. If they accepted, as most did, he would phone Mad Dog and Bronto, who would promptly show up wearing ‘Municipal Services’ T-shirts and toting professional-looking tool boxes. After an hour or so of audibly tinkering around but repairing nothing, the conman would hand the elderly homeowner the bill, to be paid for in cash, keeping 60 percent of it for himself and paying his two assistants the rest for a job well done.

“Old folks, they are easier to deal with,” the conman explained. “For most, their home is all they got, but because they can’t get around to check, they’re afraid there are a lot things, particularly in the basement and attic, that need fixing. And because their minds are slipping, they tend to be leery of checkbooks and credit cards, so they prefer to pay in cash, no questions asked.”

The man here would pause a moment to give Mad Dog and Bronto time to marvel at his cleverness.

“What I do may sound illegal, but it isn’t. I never tell them I’m working for the city. ‘Municipal Services’ is just a name I thought up. And in most states, if I charge less than \$30,000 for a job, I don’t need to have a contractor’s license. I consulted all this with a lawyer friend of mine before going into business.”

“Yeah, but you neglect to consider that a relative of one of them old folks you dupe might figure that you stole his inheritance and break your legs, or put a bullet

through your hat with your head still in it,” Mad Dog thought, but kept it to himself. As long as he and Bronto were getting paid, he didn’t give a damn how the conman made his money. In the two weeks that they had worked for him, they had earned over \$2,500, more than they had ever seen in their young lives and now they were itching to spend it.

For his part, the conman, in accordance with his game plan, had already considered what Mad Dog was thinking and had prudently taken the highway along the foot of the mountain to Interstate 81 and on to another town with a sizeable old-folk population.

Mad Dog and Bronto realized knew that they also would have to high-tail it soon, for once the scams were discovered, they would be regarded as accomplices. But they had planned to leave, anyway, Hebron being one of those dry, tight-assed towns with more churches than gas stations — not the kind of place for fun-loving young studs like themselves to spend their leisure time and money.

By contrast, Rock City on the other side of the mountain was a wide-open town, teeming with bars, gaming joints and police-protected whorehouses reputedly offering everything from pricy teen-aged chicks to toothless bargain-rate grannies. So the same Friday afternoon that the conman left town, the two young drifters filled their gas tank and took off for Rock City by way of Cow Path Road, to save time.

“If we hurry, we can make it in time to take a hot shower and join the party,” Mad Dog said.

“Yeah,” Bronto grinned lasciviously.

But no sooner had they turned into Cow Path Road than they came up behind a blue Chevy sedan moving at a turtle pace. Mad Dog leaned hard on the horn.

“Pass him. Man, pass him,” prodded Bronto.

“Can’t, damn it! There ain’t no room. This fuckin’ road is too goddamn narrow and there ain’t nothing but gully on either side. Shit!”

“Shit is right, man. That asshole is holding us up. At this pace, it’ll be midnight before we get to Rock City.”

The ‘asshole’ driving the Chevy was a shrunken old fellow peering through the steering wheel at the road ahead. Mad Dog and Bronto could barely make out the back of his head.

“One of them religious old farts from Hebron,” sniggered Mad Dog, noting the ‘Jesus Saves’ sticker on the rear bumper of the Chevy. “What in the hell is he doing on this God-forsaken road? There ain’t supposed to be no farms or nothing else between here and Rock City. Shit!”

“Probably got confused and took a wrong turn. Old farts, they do shit like that all the time. My grandpa, he got his license taken away for forgetting where the hell he was going. Caused a bunch of accidents. That’s why he gave me the van.”

Again leaning on his horn, Mad Dog accelerated until the van was bumper to bumper with the Chevy. “Maybe if I tailgate him a little he’ll pick up speed.”

“Yeah, if he sees you so close on his ass, he’s bound to drive faster.”

But the old man didn’t drive faster. Through the rear window of the Chevy, Mad Dog and Bronto could make him out, head stiff, glancing back at them in the rearview mirror.

“Old farts, why do they have to live so long?” grumbled Bronto, the geezer in the Chevy evoking galling memories of his grandpa. “Shit, when they get to be a certain age and can’t work and fuck and enjoy life no more, they should call it quits and die. A pain in the ass, a burden, that’s all they are.”

They drove on like that for several miles, Mad Dog tailgating the Chevy, honking again and again, Bronto cursing, and the old man stubbornly refusing to speed up.

Finally, they came to a spot of level ground on the side of the road and the old man pulled over to let them pass.

“Fuck you, you old fart!” they bellowed in unison as they passed, punctuating their curses with jabbing one-finger salutes. “Fuck you!”

The old man didn’t so much look their way. He just sat there behind the wheel, mannequin-like, staring straight ahead. Mad Dog gunned the van and darted up the road. By his reckoning, they were at least a half hour behind schedule.

Years ago there had been a speed-limit and warning signs posted on the more dangerous curves, but these had long been removed for firewood or had rotted out. So Mad Dog drove on, unaware of the risks ahead, the tires of the van squealing, with Bronto egging him to go even faster, the anticipated delights of the wild weekend awaiting them in Rock City heightened by the thrill of the ride.

Then it happened. Mad Dog had taken his eye off the road for a moment to say something to Bronto, when the road suddenly dipped and curved 180 degrees. Unable to make the turn, the van careened off the road, flipped over once, twice, and crashed against a boulder in the bottom of the gully. Like a mortally wounded animal, the van rumbled on for a moment, then was silent.

Mad Dog sat still and waited, listening through Bronto's mutterings and the moaning of the wind for the sound of the Chevy bearing the religious old man who, surely, would call for help and save them.

At length, the Chevy came up the road and stopped. Taking his time, the driver got out and gazed down at the wreck. Mad Dog looked up at him. The guy was a lot bigger and stronger than he had appeared sitting behind the wheel. Yes, now he remembered. This was the man he had noticed talking with a crippled old woman that the conman had duped last week, probably a neighbor or friend of hers, Mad Dog had thought at the time. No one to worry about.

From a rack in the Chevy, the man took an antique double-barrel 12-gauge shotgun, the kind that could blow the head off a bull and, glancing around, making sure no one was watching, he sure-footedly descended the gully to inspect the wreck.

First he peered into the passenger's side and saw Bronto lying unconscious on the floorboard. Then he went to driver's side where Mad Dog was crushed against the seat, gasping and coughing up blood.

"Please help us, Mister," Mad Dog, now in great pain, pleaded.

"Please! My buddy and me, we're hurt real bad!"

He tried to lock eyes with the man, to elicit compassion, but the man just looked past him, saying nothing, as if he didn't exist.

Then of a sudden it dawned on him. The man with the shotgun had set up the accident. He must have been stalking them since he learned of the scams, seen them preparing to leave Hebron and sensed they would be heading for Rock City on Cow Path Road, hurrying to get there before sundown. So he had driven on ahead and deliberately slowed them down, figuring that once they passed him they would drive on at reckless speed to make up for lost time. He must have also known that old road like the back of

his hand and picked the place where he would pull over to let them pass, and even predicted where they would crash.

Mad Dog's pleading here gave way to a wail, and the wail to a protracted shriek that pierced the cold mountain air. But the man wasn't listening. He calmly returned to his Chevy, put the shotgun back on its rack — he wouldn't be needing it after all — and slowly drove away.