

Extract from “Refinery Road” by Stephen Graham Jones, a short story taken from *When Things Get Dark*.

Years later, at a trivia game in the bar of the hotel Jensen’s company had him at for three days, *An Officer and a Gentleman* would roll up on every screen. The title and the poster both. The movie was the answer to whatever the obscure question had been— Jensen hadn’t really been interested, was just riding out the cheers and groans, trying to finish his drink without getting jostled too much. The room and meals and cab fares were all expensed, but this drink, all nine dollars of it, was his and his alone.

He left it sitting there, along with two singles for the bartender.

It wasn’t because he could have won that round if he’d been quicker on the draw. Even if he’d been tuned in, he wouldn’t have called *that* movie out. He’d never even finished it. According to the screens still assaulting him from all sides, it was from 1982, Richard Gere and Debra Winger, but when Jensen, seventeen then, had pushed it into his family’s VCR in 1988, he didn’t know Gere or Winger by name, by face, any of that. He just knew he’d liked *Top Gun* enough his sophomore year, and according to the back of the box this was another fighter pilot thing and had been on ninety-nine-cent rental at the grocery store, so why not.

Jensen had just been getting into the movie when Cara called him. The whole time she was telling him where she was, he was staring at *An Officer and a Gentleman* paused on-screen, the video barely holding on, the tracking lines and static juddering this drill sergeant scene.

It was bad for the tape, but Jensen left it paused like that all the same.

Why Cara needed Jensen to pick her up now now *now* was that when she’d come home with a tattoo of her dead little brother’s name on the inside of her left wrist, so she could touch it with the fingertips of her right hand, her dad had lost it, called her every name he had coiled up inside, and when Cara finally ran out the front door he’d fired his welding truck up, chased her through all the empty lots on their block, trying to run her down. He only stopped when she stumbled across the railroad tracks and his truck was too long, high-centered on the rails, both the front and back tires spinning in the air.

When Jensen picked her up at the gas station, Cara huddled in, just told him drive, drive, she didn’t want to be here anymore. Her lip was busted. Jensen offered her a tissue from the little pack his mom kept in the center console. He wasn’t supposed to take the Buick out without explicit permission, but this was an emergency. He was already making the argument in his head. But if he got ragged on for taking it, so what. This was Cara, his best friend. She’d been there for him on the playground in fourth grade when he wet his pants, and she’d held his hand once at the mall, to try to make a girl Jensen liked jealous, and when her little brother had overdosed in his bedroom last year, Jensen had held her head to his shoulder for all of one afternoon, and let her hit the side of her fists into his chest and shoulders every few minutes, when it all rose for her again.

They picked Mote up once Cara was calm enough. His parents had decorated the front of their house for Halloween, and the reason Jensen turned the headlights off while Mote was locking his front door was that dad’s being *Halloween decoration*-cool like that wasn’t what Cara needed to see right then.

Mote slipped into the back seat like ducking out of a bank he’d just robbed, and that wasn’t all wrong: he had a six of his dad’s beer.

“Where to?” Jensen asked all around.

“Just go,” Cara told him.

They made the usual circuit: up the drag, back down the drag, turning around at the auto parts store, but the night was dead. It was Tuesday.

"Let me see," Mote said, taking Cara by the chin.

He ran the back of his knuckle under her bloodied lip.

"It's gonna fat up," he told her, leaning back.

"Thanks, Einstein," Cara said back, and was just taking his proffered beer when the cop car that they didn't know had pulled up alongside flashed its light.

"Shit," Jensen said, both hands finding the wheel.

"Shh, shh," Mote said.

Cara snaked her bottle down, let it hide alongside her thigh, but the cop hadn't lit up for them. He was already accelerating away, blasting through the light.

"Go see," Mote said to Jensen.

"What, are we moths?" Jensen said back. It was what his mom always told him, about being drawn to what she called "episodes of trouble."

"More like fireflies," Cara said softly, and Jensen sneaked a look over at her, like her face was going to be as wistful as her voice.

He waited the red light out, followed that cop car, Mote calling out its right turn.

It took them back by the gas station Jensen had picked Cara up at.

"No," she said, leaning closer to the windshield.

"What?" Jensen asked.

"Where'd he go?" Mote said, leaning over the front seat, his beer dangling from his fingers for all the world to see.

"Left," Cara said, so certain Jensen could only follow.

They could see the blue and red lights a block and a half before they got there.

It was the train tracks.

Extracted from the short story "Refinery Road" by Stephen Graham Jones and which is included in the short story collection "When Things Get Dark", stories inspired by, and written in tribute to, Shirley Jackson.