

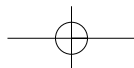
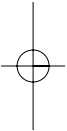
T. J. WATSON

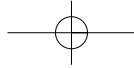
She passed out sometime in the night and when she woke she turned her head towards a light, a lantern, and in a haze she saw Jimmy talking to a woman she didn't recognize. He was saying things to her, but she couldn't understand what, and then he began kissing the woman and his hand went up her leg. The girl closed her eyes and when she opened them again she was alone in the darkness of the tent.

She sat up, got herself together the best she could, found her purse and coat, and left. She went by the tents and passed the fires where people were still drinking and talking, and then by the empty stage, and finally passed the long row of parked cars, including Jimmy's, and began walking faster. She'd have to hitchhike. She didn't know if anyone drove that road at night, but she hoped she'd catch a ride before daylight. At least before the party broke and everyone left.

She stood alongside the two lane road for an hour, but only a single truck passed and it didn't stop. Two cars had come down the gravel road from the party, leaving. When she saw the headlights from them, she laid down in the dirt behind sage brush and waited until they were gone.

Just after four o'clock in the morning, a tractor-trailer passed and saw her, then slowed and pulled over. She ran towards the cab as fast as she could and without hesitation got in, sat in the passenger seat, and shut the door.





‘I ain’t supposed to have riders,’ the old man who was the driver said. ‘I could get fired for it, but I ain’t about to let a girl sit out in the middle of the desert alone. My wife would have my hide if I did that.’ He was smoking a cigarette as he spoke, his face lit only by the dim dashboard lights. She guessed he was in his sixties. He was a big man who was overweight. The radio was playing and he was dressed in a white, short-sleeved western shirt and black jeans. He was balding and wore glasses with half-inch-thick lenses and steel rims.

‘You all right?’

‘Thanks for picking me up.’

‘My name is T.J. Watson. You can call me Tom if you want. What’s your name?’ He looked in the side mirror, put the truck into first, and started them back on the road.

‘Allison Johnson.’

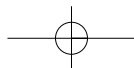
‘If you don’t mind me asking, Allison, what in the hell are you doing all the way out here?’

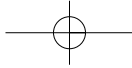
‘I was at a party. There was a huge party in the desert.’

‘Didn’t feel like staying, huh?’

‘Not really,’ she said. She looked about the cab. It was warm. The seat was comfortable and there was the smell of cigarettes and coffee. He was listening to talk radio.

‘My boy used to go to parties in the mountains. We live outside Reno, me and my wife. He and I rebuilt a 1972 Ford pick up together. We used it for hunting and camping mostly. He used to take that thing up into the mountains and him and his friends would have parties. I suppose a lot like the party you were at. He’d bring up his chainsaw and cut up some old fallen trees and start a big fire. Probably drank beer and did who knows what. You want a splash of coffee?’





‘Okay,’ the girl said.

‘The thermos is next to you and there should be a clean cup behind your seat.’

She reached around the seat and found the cup, then opened the thermos and poured the coffee into it.

‘Do you need a refill?’ she asked timidly.

‘No,’ he said. ‘I’m almost through, and I’m so jittery I’m like a goddamn jack rabbit. Listen, I’m done at the Flying J. They give us a room there. I hope that will be far enough. You heading back to town?’

‘Yeah,’ she said.

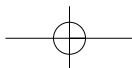
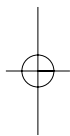
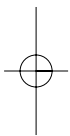
‘There’s probably a bus or something. Probably catch a ride easy then. Or at least wait until it’s light so you can see what you’re getting into. It can be dangerous, hitchhiking. I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone. Especially a young girl,’ he said and fell silent.

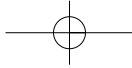
‘Does your wife ever ride with you?’ she asked after awhile.

‘She used to all the time,’ he answered. ‘When she retired I got on as a long haul driver for a different company, and they didn’t mind me having a rider. She must have gone with me for five or six years. All over the country. We’ve seen most of the highlights. Then she got tired of it, so I got a job with a company out of Reno. That was maybe five years ago. I’m only away two, maybe three nights a week. But I’m retiring in a year anyway.’

‘Did she like driving around? I mean at first?’

‘I think so. We used to do crossword puzzles. She’d have a couple dictionaries on her lap and we’d do them from every local paper we found. We started listening to books on tape. She’d read novels to me. Westerns mostly. Zane Grey, Louis Lamour. I like a lot of things, but a good western is nice to drive to. That or





mysteries. Mysteries pass the time pretty good.'

'I think I'd like that. To see things from here.'

'It ain't a bad life. Better than being in an office or a warehouse or at a desk. It's got its good points and bad points like anything else. I hate to pry, but my wife, she'll be curious about you when I tell her I picked you up. She'll want to know. You get in a fight with your boyfriend? Is that what got you stranded out here?'

'Kind of,' she said and took a drink of her coffee, and then suddenly was crying.

'I'm sorry,' she said in a broken voice.

'There's nothing wrong with crying. You're young, you'll be all right. I know that sounds like a bag of hot air to you right now, but it's true.'

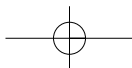
'It doesn't seem to help,' she said.

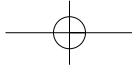
The man laughed. 'My wife would probably have something better to say.'

'I hate when I cry in front of other people.'

She set the coffee mug between her legs and wiped her eyes.

'There's nothing wrong with crying,' he said and paused. 'My boy, the one I was telling you about – he and his girlfriend were driving home from camping out near Elko. It was maybe three in the afternoon and a driver crossed the median and ran into them. It killed everyone involved. On a Tuesday this happened. In early June. Not a cloud in the sky, the roads were fine. The lady that hit them was alone in the car, and she had three kids at home. She was married and was a teacher for a high school. They say she just fell asleep. It wasn't drinking, and she wasn't on drugs. But her just falling asleep cost me my boy, cost her kids a mom, cost his girlfriend's folks a daughter. Imagine that. All 'cause someone fell





asleep. My poor wife could barely get out of bed after it happened. She didn't want to go out on the road either, she just wanted to stay home. So I quit my long haul job and got this one. But I can't even tell you how many nights I've sat in this cab and cried my eyes out. Out of the blue it'll just hit me. Like a breeze or a cough. Just pops up and hits down on you like a hammer, and then you just start crying. Sometimes it gets to where I have to pull the truck over 'cause I can't stop. I just have to close my eyes and lay down in the seats. Or if I'm on this route and I'm in the desert, sometimes I'll just pull over and get out. I'll put on my hiking boots and just start walking. I'm never gone that long, but I feel better when I get back.'

'I'm sorry about your son.'

'Thank you for saying so,' he said. He tuned the station on the radio and turned it up.

'I'm pregnant,' the girl said finally.

'No kidding?' he said and coughed.

'I am.'

'How far are you along?'

'Almost three months.'

'The boy, your boyfriend, what's he say?'

'He doesn't know.'

'You think maybe you should tell him?'

'He's not a good person.'

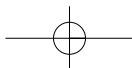
The girl began crying again.

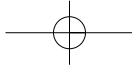
'You got any family?'

'My mom and my sister.'

'They know?'

'I haven't told anyone.'





‘You’d be surprised by people sometimes. People understand a lot more than you give them credit for.’

‘Maybe,’ she said and looked out the window. ‘Does your wife like Reno?’

‘She thinks the area is the greatest place on earth. She grew up on a ranch in Washoe Valley. Her folks were cattle people, but then her dad got on at a machine shop and they sold their place and moved into town. I don’t think she’s ever left except for spending a summer with her aunt in Chicago and traveling around with me when I was on long haul. I’m from Tacoma, Washington. Some of my family still live up there, but I got a job in Reno after I got out of the army. Then I met my wife and we got married and lived in the city for a few years. Then we bought a house ten miles away in the town of Verdi. On the foothills of the Sierras. I’m not a hundred yards from the Truckee River. We got a little place with a yard full of pinyon pines.’

‘Sounds beautiful.’

‘You should visit sometime. My wife would enjoy the company. She enjoys young people. You ever listen to Art Bell on the radio?’

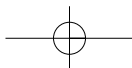
‘The guy that talks about aliens and space ships?’

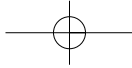
‘That’s him.’

‘My sister listens to him at night sometimes. In the mornings she’ll tell me about what he says. She loves all that sorta thing. *Star Wars* and *The X-Files*, *Lord of the Rings*, all the *Star Treks*.’

‘I don’t know any of those shows.’

‘You’d like *The X-Files*. It’s a TV show. If you like Art Bell then you’d really like it. It’s full of extra terrestrial stuff. Weird things happen. It’s about these two FBI agents who track down aliens. One of the agents believes in it all and everyone thinks he’s crazy.’





So the bosses at the FBI assign him a partner who's a scientist. She's skeptical all the time and really smart and really beautiful and they're always almost falling in love with each other. My sister reads books about that sorta thing. There's that one about getting abducted she just read. It starts with a C, I think.'

'You mean *Communion*?'

'Yeah,' Allison said. 'I think that's the one.'

'My wife read that to me.'

'That stuff freaks me out, but my sister Evelyn, she loves it.'

'The reason I asked is Art Bell's show is going to start in a couple minutes, and I promised the wife I'd listen to it. She has a hard time sleeping at night, so she listens to him, and she likes it when I do too. She takes little notes on it, keeps a pad by the bed and turns on the light when he says something good and pencils it down. Then when I call we can talk about it.'

'Have you ever seen a UFO?'

'No,' he said and laughed.

'I haven't either,' she said. Some time passed and then the girl started crying again, quietly.

'It'll be all right,' the old man said. 'Once you face it, it'll be all right. You got a baby to think about now. Once you admit that, you'll know what to do.'

