

HEAT WAVE 4

by

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Coup dreamed: of angry, orange sunlight and piano music and road markings which disappeared beneath the Mustang's dirty hood; of driving alone along State Route 87—which vanished in the distance like a Möbius Strip undone and laid flat—and the sun sinking below a dark horizon. Nor did the dream remain static but promptly moved on, as Henry Becker had moved on, as the world had moved on, for a hitchhiker had appeared at the side of the road: one who was not Tess, as had been the case in real life, but rather a kind of zombie; an animate corpse; a thing who's head had borne a horrific wound and who's intestines were being held in by its free hand (for its other was busy thumbing a ride).

A thing which gave up its enigma as Coup pulled alongside and opened the passenger door; for it was none other than Henry Becker himself—alone, mortally wounded, but appearing oddly chipper, oddly spry, as he opened the hatch and climbed in—swinging it shut behind him, holding in his guts.

"Hey," he said, as his entrails shifted and squelched, threatening to squeeze out between his fingers, threatening to fill the car with 28-feet of membrane.

"Hey," said Coup. He reached into the cooler in back, twisting in his seat, and handed him a can of soda. "Since I'm obviously dreaming ... you must be dehydrated. Diet Pepsi?"

"No, thanks." He reached up and pulled down the sun visor, examining himself in the mirror. "It didn't exactly swallow me whole, did it? Jesus. Look at these teeth marks."

"Look, Henry,"

"No. I do the talking. I've got things to tell you." He paused, fingering the hole in his head, which was about three inches in diameter. "This one, right here," He swished his finger around the cavity. "*That* hurt."

"Dammit, Henry ..."

"I told you ..." He came up with a piece of brain tissue and paused to examine it, then rolled it—like a booger—between his thumb and forefinger. "One of its canines—it got my eye." He discarded it out the win-

dow. “I guess they’re all canines in the mouth of a T. Rex, eh?” Blood gurgled from the corners of his mouth. “*Amirite?*”

“Madness,” muttered Coup, and focused on the road, wondering when he’d fallen asleep—and if the others were still on guard. Wondering if Tess, who had fallen asleep by the jukebox and whom he’d covered with a “Survival Blanket”—otherwise known as a *blanket*—which the Rendezvous had been marketing to preppers and other rural types, was okay.

“I’ve come to tell you what you need to do in order to survive, and for the others to survive,” said Henry, and mercifully faced forward. “What you need to *be*. For the Flashback is not—and has never been—a natural phenomenon. Nor is it, at least in the strictest sense, a supernatural one. That’s the first thing you need to know. The second is that the clock—which is to say, time-space itself—*has been broken*.”

He turned to face Coup—who couldn’t help but to notice he could see utility poles passing *through* his head—as if for emphasis. “*The clock has been broken*, Mr. Black. It has been replaced with something else; a new clock, one whose arms move both forward and back—and whose numbers count in the quadrillions, and beyond. Imagine it: A clock with an infinity of arms, some racing around its dial in a blur while others have slowed to a snail’s crawl, or even stopped.” He hesitated, looking out the window. “On second thought, don’t. The conundrum will just piss you off.”

He faced forward again.

“And the third is that while not of the natural world, and not, strictly, supernatural, the Flashback is—nonetheless—*eschatological*. And it is by its hardships and uncertainties that you will be—”

He paused as though he found it suddenly difficult to talk, and not just because his throat had been torn out, which hadn’t stopped him before. That’s when Coup became aware of the red-orange sunlight shining in his face like a fire—Becker’s, not his own; impossible, of course—causing him to break out in a sweat, forcing him to squint and to turn away.

And yet he continued: “The mighty must be laid low, Mr. Black. And the meek, the small, the defenseless, brought up. Mark it well. For that is all I am allowed to ... All I am allowed ... Indeed it is more than—” And he just froze, like a victim of Medusa turning to stone, his skin cracking and fracturing, flaking away, his eye seeming to dry out and become concave, until he whispered, haltingly, gravely, “I hope—I hope I shall still see her,” and became like sunbaked basalt or a chaotic fall of cooled lava; no longer a man but an eidolon of stone; just a pillar with arms and legs, as Coup looked at the setting sun and saw not just the sun but the *God’s Eye* of his youth; and felt as though it were watching him, judging him, preparing punishments—not just for him but for the entire world.

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THE FIRST THING HE saw as he struggled up from sleep was the President’s profile, which, in the dark, reminded him of Alfred Hitchcock’s—only wearing a toupee; the front of which stabbed forward like a kind of blonde horn or uncertain phallus, while the back, duck tailed and wispy, seemed to offer ballast. It surprised him how unkempt the whole affair was; how *long*, as if he belonged to another decade entirely, another era, and had been “Flash-forwarded”—no less than the dinosaurs—into both the New Millennium and the Presidency.

Mostly, however, Coup was just relieved to find someone alert; for the other night watchers, to a man (Sargent Bo, Cameron the activist, Johnny From Tucson) and one woman (the little girl’s mother, Abbie) were all slumped in their chairs; and the store was silent (or nearly so, for there was something smoky emanating from the jukebox which he immediately recognized as the music from his dream). Tucker, meanwhile, had pulled a chair up next to Coup at the end of the row—right in front of the window, where Tess had placed Ricky-Tik’s makeshift bed—and was just sort of perched there, his hands held below his waist and between his legs, fingertips and thumbs touching, the space in between forming a

triangle, as he peered into the fog (which had rolled in about 10:40 and showed no signs of abating) and seemed to, well, smolder.

"You're fired," he said, as Coup wiped the sleep from his eyes, and smiled, his demeanor softening. He was drinking a Diet Coke. "You know, if I really were firing you, I'd tell you what a great job you were doing, how fantastic you are, and how you could do better someplace else." He finished the Coke and sat it at his feet, after which Coup glanced at the man's shoes (polished, black oxfords which appeared to have lifts in the heels, which was curious because he was already quite tall) and saw several empty Diet Coke bottles lined up in a row.

"If somebody steals, that's different, but generally speaking, you want to let them down as lightly as possible. It's not a very pleasant thing. Firing. I don't like firing people, to be perfectly honest."

It was on the tip of Coup's tongue to suggest that he seemed to enjoy it on TV when Tucker continued: "I like the phrase, don't get me wrong. I mean, there's no arguing with it. There is no anything. There is no beating around the bush. 'You're fired' is a very strong term. Every time I walk outside, somebody says it, and the funny thing is, everybody thinks I'm hearing it for the first time. 'You're fired!' I get it literally a hundred times a day. Little kids come up to me and say, 'Mr. Tucker, you're fired' and then run away laughing. It's become a mania. YOU'RE FIRED hats and T-shirts. It's a beautiful phrase. It's harsh, it's ugly, it's mean, but it's concise and it gets the job done."

"Yeah, well." Coup had no idea what to say. "Whatever works, right?" He diverted his eyes to the sleeping marsupial, which had begun twitching and squeaking, as though it were dreaming. "What do you suppose a little guy like that dreams about?"

Tucker gave no indication of having heard him. "You have to be able to sell it, whatever it is. I've learned some hard lessons—hard lessons, believe me. One of them was when I kept losing to Pat Buchanan—in 2000. Can you believe that? Pat Buchanan. He was a Hitler lover, let me tell you. I guess he's an anti-Semite. He doesn't like the blacks, doesn't like

the gays. It's just incredible that anybody could embrace this guy. And yet there he was, out-polling me, and not just once but many, many times. And that's because he had this really staunch right wacko vote ... what? What is it?"

"Nothing—it's just that ..." Coup leaned forward and put his finger in Ricky-Tik's water, swished it around. "It's tepid." He looked at Tucker. "He hasn't touched it since we got here."

Tucker just looked at him. "What are you, it's mother? So get one of the gals to come look—"

"I'm going to put some in his mouth. A couple swallows." He stood and moved toward the drink dispenser. "Just—hold the thought. Please, Mr. President."

There was an audible sigh. At last Tucker said: "Where's the ice? Do we have ice?"

"Over here, Mr. President."

Tucker joined him at the fountains (as Coup removed two cups from the dispenser and handed him one), then proceeded to hover—to loom, really; he was a big man—as the writer filled his own with water. When he didn't move even after Coup had started to head back the younger man just looked at him.

"You're, ah—you're kidding me, right?"

And then he walked back, took the President's cup, pushed it against the little bar, and filled it with ice.

By the time Tucker got around to the Wall—as Coup had somehow known he would—Ricky-Tik had perked up considerably; enough so that the rodent-like animal had begun to move tentatively about his box, and even, even, to whine a little—perhaps the surest sign yet that he was returning to the land of the living.

Tucker, meanwhile, had continued carrying on; so much so that it had become clear to Coup that the man had not only taken the Flash-back extremely hard, but—and this was the chilling aspect—*personally*; as though the tragedy of the phenomenon was not so much that it had ef-

fected millions of people but that it had—temporarily, in his view—frustrated his Presidency. At which Coup—having never been a fan—couldn't help but to laugh. For even against the Apocalypse itself, Donald J. Tucker had found a way to make it about himself.

Still he continued: "The wall was necessary. It was necessary, okay? Look, we had to. We had to. People say the money could have been better spent—that it didn't need the spikes, say, or the gangway for the guards, or the mote. But I play into people's fantasies. People may not always think big themselves, but they can still get very excited by those who do. That's why a little hyperbole never hurts. People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. In the case of my wall, it *is* the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular—I mean, have you seen it? Beautiful. Beautiful. Wouldn't you say, Coup?"

Coup looked around as people started to wake up. "Well, I—I guess as far as walls go—it's a monster, that's for sure. Makes for some great shade. About 50-billion dollars' worth."

Nobody said anything.

"I take it you don't agree," said the President.

"I'd say your instinct on that is flawless," said Coup. He looked the man squarely in the face. "As always."

Tucker just looked back—his large eyes puffy and purple, his brow furrowed. It was pretty clear that he wasn't used to being challenged—on anything. "What's not coming through anymore, Coup?"

Abbie yawned and tried to intervene woozily. "Has anyone eaten anything? I'm starving ..."

"No, no, no. What's not coming through anymore?"

Coup pinched the bridge of his nose, already tired with the conversation. "Look, how about we just leave it—"

"Murderers, Coup. Drug runners. Human traffickers. *Bing bing, bong bong, bing bing*. You name it. Rapists ..."

"Murderers and rapists ..."

"Well, someone was doing the raping, Coup! I mean, somebody was doing it. Who was doing the raping? Who was doing the raping?"

"Jesus, I was doing raping, can we drop it, si?" said Johnny from Tuscan, and stood, leaving the group.

Tucker and Coup looked at each other as Briggs straightened in his chair.

"Going to I.D. him, Chief?" said Coup, his eyes still locked with the President.

And then something thumped against the window and everyone jumped, and when they all focused on it they saw an enormous tri-clawed hand pressed open-palmed against the glass; a hand which moved downward as they watched so that the tips of its claws scraped like fingernails on a chalkboard. Then it was gone, retreating into the gloom—within which Coup saw a massive shape shift and move forward, even as another massive shape crossed opposite it, so that it was clear to him that whatever had touched the window was not alone.

It's here, said a voice in Coup's ear—Henry, for all the world, and added: *The thing that killed my wife ... and me, too. It—and one other. But they are not—*

"Yousef, Malone!" shouted Bo, gripping his rifle. "Get your gear and meet me on the roof. Come on, double-time it!"

And they did, even as the State Trooper and the other Secret Service agent—who's name Coup hadn't caught—took up positions near the doors. Halverson, meanwhile, emerged from behind the counter and promptly escorted the President away. Not back, *away*.

"Motherfuckers are *big*," said Rory, peering into the fog, pressing against the glass. "Whatever they are."

"Everybody get back," said Coup, extending an arm. "Get back! The lights are off—there's no reason for them to even know we're here."

"They're gonna to know when those soldiers open fire," said Rory, backing away.

“Tess!” shouted Coup, for she was waking up near the juke-box—which was near the counter and thus the roof access. “Tell those men to hold their fire.”

“Belay that order,” said Halverson, reemerging from the back. “The commander in chief wants an immediate response.” He paused a little breathlessly. “His explanation—not that one is needed—was that the integrity of the windows must be preserved at all costs.” He looked at Tess, who had paused at the edge of the counter. “Is that understood?”

She glanced at Coup hesitantly, who seemed to acquiesce, grudgingly, then back to Halverson. Then she nodded once and proceeded toward the rood access.

“Everybody take cover,” said Rory, taking cover himself behind a rack of sunglasses. “And try not to move.”

At which everybody took cover and tried not to move, including Ricky-Tik himself, who rolled into a tight little ball as if he too had heeded the big, black man’s directive, causing those close enough to see to laugh nervously.

A moment later an enormous head swung out of the gloom, like a great, dark dagger, and paused parallel to the glass, its white-on-white pupil constricting, seeming to focus, its cobra-like hood inflating. It was quickly nudged aside by another, this one even bigger, which floated over Ricky-Tik’s box like a ghost.

“Jesus,” said Coup. “It’s fucking Nag and Nagaina.”

“*Shhh!*,” cursed Rory. “Nobody move or say anything.”

Everyone watched as the head lowered and seemed to sniff at the glass, its visible eye blinking, its breath fogging the pane.

“It sees us,” said Ashley. “Oh, sweet Jesus. It knows we’re here.”

“*Where are those soldiers?*” hissed Carson.

“No!” said Long quickly. He shuffled up next to Coup. “Tell them to hold their fire.”

Coup looked at him confusedly. “Who am I, fucking MacArthur? You heard Halverson. Besides, they’re going to open fire any—”

"They're not after us and they don't see us," said Long breathlessly. "They couldn't care less about us. What they're attracted to is ... that animal."

Coup move to speak but hesitated, turning to look at Ricky-Tik, as well as the great carnivore that was sniffing at him, inspecting him. "Holy shit. Do you think ..."

"I think there's a relationship between them that we can't possibly know about, is what I think," said Long. "All I know is, well, just look at them."

Coup continued to do so, noticing for the first time that the little marsupial was growling—growling threateningly even while curled up in his little ball.

"He seems to know just what to do. Which is to play possum," he said.

"Something we might want to mimic," said Long. "At least until we understand the situation. I mean, what if they're ... I don't know. Natural enemies? If that were the case then these predators might be instinctually driven to eliminate him before he can grow into a threat. Does that make sense?"

Coup looked from him to the hooded dinosaur, then down to Ricky-Tik. "It's the only thing that does, actually."

"Okay, so?" —Carson. In his fucking MAGA hat. "Let's push the little fucker out the door, then."

Coup looked at him incredulously. "And give them their first whiff of Brute aftershave and Pumpkin Spice perfume and Human Hors d'Oeuvres? Perfect."

"No, he's right," said Long. "We give them the marsupial ... and I think they'll go away. At least for now."

At that Carson struggled to his feet and quickly shuffled away, even as Coup and Long continued to look at each other.

"Maybe the best thing," said Coup at last, "is to let the military handle it."

“Against animals that size? And with limited ammunition?” Long *brmpled*. “Good luck keeping those windows intact. Not once those things are pissed, or in their death throes.”

Coup looked after Carson. “Where do you think that fat ass went?”

Long grinned. “Are you kidding? He went to tell King Tuck—”

And then he jumped, they both did, for there had been another impact—from the carnivore brushing against the window—as well as a *crack, ki-crack, crack!* which they quickly realized was the glass beginning to break.

To be continued in
HEAT WAVE 5

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Coming Soon

