

DEATH GRADER

by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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*Statement of Ms. Eleanor “Elle” Westbrook (January 17th, 3:30 PM,
interviewed by Detective Ollie Rowe)*

Detective Rowe: I want you to relax, Ms. Westbrook—is it okay if I call you Eleanor?

Westbrook: I prefer Elle.

Detective Rowe: Elle. Now I want you to relax ... and tell me about the first time you saw the road grader actually move. Can you do that for me?

Westbrook: Sure. It was the day after Christmas—the 26th, I think. It was a Thursday. I remember it because, well, besides the grader moving for the first time, it was movie night in the community room. *Frozen II*. Which—

Detective Rowe: At Farmington Hall. The orphanage. Is that correct?

Westbrook: Yes, but—we don’t call it that. An orphanage, that is. The nuns don’t like it.

Detective Rowe: But you were home?

Westbrook: Yes. In my room. I’d had a terrible nightmare and was just waking up, when I heard—

Detective Rowe: Talk about that a little. Your nightmare. Do you remember it?

Westbrook: No. Not really. Just bits and pieces. I remember ...

Detective Rowe: Yes?

Westbrook: I remember ... it had the road grader in it. And it—it killed somebody. It ran over him with its front tires and then ...

Detective Rowe: Yes?

Westbrook: I’d rather not say.

Detective Rowe: But I’m asking you to, Elle. It’s okay. It ran over him with its front tires and ...?

Westbrook: And then it dropped that big plow it has.

Detective Rowe: The moldboard. The blade it uses to grade the roads.

Westbrook: (inaudible)

Detective Rowe: I'm going to ask you to speak clearly and not just nod, okay? We're recording.

Westbrook: Yes, sir. That one. The big one. It—it dropped it right on him. And then I heard it strike the ground ... I mean, the pavement under the snow.

Detective Rowe: So it—look, I know how difficult this must be, considering ... So it passed clean through him, is that it?

Westbrook: (inaudible)

Detective Rowe: No nodding. Okay. What then?

Westbrook: He opened up. Like ... like a can of spaghetti.

Detective Rowe: (inaudible) Okay. I can see you're upset by this. Let's switch gears a bit. Did you recognize this—this man? You did say it was a he. Was it somebody you recognized from your real life? Your waking life?

Westbrook: No.

Detective Rowe: I see. And you're sure about that?

Westbrook: Yes. Positive. The grader was looking for someone to kill—when the man stumbled out of that bar on 4th Street, the one where all the homeless people hang out.

Detective Rowe: And where were you, in your dream, that is?

Westbrook: That's what's so funny. Because I distinctly remember watching the grader approach from the sidewalk, which was covered in snow. Just standing there, right outside the bar. And yet when I saw him killed I was inside the cab, looking down through the glass. At one point I was even way up above it—the grader, that is—like, like God. I guess I was sort of everywhere and nowhere, if that makes any sense.

Detective Rowe: Yes. Yes, it does. Okay. That's good. That's very good. Thank you. Let's go back now—to when you first saw it move. Is that all right?

Westbrook: Sure. Like I said, I'd just woken up from the dream when I heard it, just rumbling across the field where they'd been working on the road—

Detective Rowe: The I-890—North Schenectady Corridor.

Westbrook: Sure, I guess. So I went to my window—you know, to see what was going on, and saw it sputtering to a stop near the office trailers and other equipment—which were all covered in snow—just shutting down with a rattle, like it had been running for a long time. That's when I first noticed it, how clean it was—there was no snow on it at all. Like—

Detective Rowe: But it was there when you went to sleep, isn't that correct?

Westbrook: Yes, of course. Covered in snow. It hadn't moved since December, when they had that accident—you know, where the worker was killed.

Detective Rowe: Clarke. The foreman. I seem to recall they had several accidents; including when they rammed into that layer of concrete.

Westbrook: (inaudible)

Detective Rowe: What?

Westbrook: The Meyers. James and Mia. That's where the concrete was at. I used to talk with them sometimes, before the accid—

Detective Rowe: You knew them?

Westbrook: Before the traffic accident. The one with the semi. Last summer.

Detective Rowe: Yes, I seem to recall that too. Something about them accelerating out of control—

Westbrook: I think *they* did it.

Detective Rowe: I'm sorry?

Westbrook: The bugs.

Detective Rowe: The ... *bugs*.

Westbrook: (inaudible): In the concrete. Where the Meyers buried them. At least, until the road grader came along.

Detective Rowe: (inaudible) I want you to hold that, okay? Hold that very thought. There's a psychiatrist coming, Ms. Daniels, a very nice lady, who's going to talk with you about all that—when we're finished, okay?

Westbrook: Okay.

Detective Rowe: Now, and this is important, so I want you to think about it very carefully. Did you at any point see anyone get out of the motor grader?

Westbrook: You already asked me that.

Detective Rowe: Once more—for the record. Please.

Westbrook: No. Like I said.

Detective Rowe: But it *was* dark, isn't that right? Dark, and snowing.

Westbrook: Yes, but not like later. The storm was just getting started.

Detective Rowe: I see. And then you went back to—

Westbrook: No.

Detective Rowe: You didn't go back to sleep? What did you do?

Westbrook: I went down to the community room, to tell Sister Bryant.

Detective Rowe: All right. And ... were they still watching the movie ... (inaudible) *Frozen II*?

Westbrook: No. All the girls had gone to bed. It was just Sister Bryant, who had fallen asleep on the couch.

Detective Rowe: Okay. And did you wake her up, to tell her what you had seen?

Westbrook: (inaudible)

Detective Rowe: I'm sorry?

Westbrook: No. She ... she never liked me. So I thought it was a bad idea.

Detective Rowe: Oh. So there was—bad blood between you?

Westbrook: I wouldn't say that. I was fine with her. She just ... didn't like me. I didn't drive the road grader over her—if that's what you mean. That was them.

Detective Rowe: The, ah ... bugs?

Westbrook: Yeah. The ghosts of them. Their bodies are still in the cement.

Detective Rowe: I see. Okay. And then?

Westbrook: I waited for her to wake up.

Detective Rowe: All right. And?

Westbrook: Which took about an hour—I guess, maybe less—I was watching the news. Then she woke up ... and I told her all about it. About the machine.

Detective Rowe: About the grader. Okay. And what did she say?

Westbrook: She didn't believe me, not even for a second. So I led her to the window and we looked out, and sure enough, the snow had re-covered it—the entire road grader. It had even refilled its tracks.

Detective Rowe: I imagine that didn't go over so well.

Westbrook: No. And I got the switch for it. Which is why I didn't mention it again—to anybody—not even when the reports of people finding body parts in the snow started coming out. Of course I knew what was going on because I saw the grader leave every night—after which I would always dream it had killed someone. And then it would just rattle back and park itself, usually about 11 pm.

Detective Rowe: You were alone.

Westbrook: Yeah. But what's new.

Detective Rowe: And you knew something had to be done. At least that's what you told me earlier.

Westbrook: Sure—if I wasn't imaging everything.

Detective Rowe: And you decided you had to get closer. To inspect it yourself.

Westbrook: Yeah. The day after New Years. The day after they found the Smythe lady all chopped up in quarters.

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STATEMENT OF MS. ELEANOR "Elle" Westbrook (January 17th, 5:30 PM, interviewed by Doctor Regina Daniels)

Dr. Daniels: So after you trudged through the snow and reached the road grader—and that must have been quite a task on January 2nd, when there was so much accumulation—you say you used a broom to clean off the moldboard—is that correct?

Westbrook: That big blade, yeah. That's when I noticed the blood—just splashed all over it like dried blackberry syrup. But there was something else, too, which was sort of draped over the plow like a garland, all shiny and pink.

Dr. Daniels: (inaudible) What on earth was it?

Westbrook: Oh, It was an intestine, though how it got on top of the plow I have no idea. All I know is I wanted to run away after that—as far away as I could, farther even than Farmington Hall—and would have ... if not for the voices.

Dr. Daniels: The voices. Coming from—where, exactly?

Westbrook: Oh, everywhere. And nowhere. Coming from my head. But also from the road grader—from its cab. Like there were people inside—little people, I thought, I don't know why—all talking at the same time. Like they were arguing.

Dr. Daniels: My goodness. Well. That must have been extremely frightening. What on earth did you do?

Westbrook: I wanted to run, like I said—

Dr. Daniels: Yes, I can see why—

Westbrook: But I didn't, because it seemed to be drawing me in, toward itself—the cab, that is. Like a big magnet. Not only that, but there was a weird light inside—not a bright light, like in a house, but sort of a fog, like those pictures you see of distant galaxies, just sort of a green smear. And the next thing I knew I had opened the hatch and climbed in and the door had slammed shut—which made me jump—and they started talking, just, addressing me directly, as plain and clear as you are now.

Dr. Daniels: Oh, my goodness ... And—and what did they say?

Westbrook: They—they told me that they needed my help. That they were getting too weak to move the grader but that their work wasn't finished and that much infestation remained. That if I helped them they would ... they would spare me. And then they began saying other things, most of which I didn't understand—only the tone, which was hateful. And then I did run, although I had difficulty with the door and banged my hand up real good.

Dr. Daniels: I *see* that.

Westbrook: But it didn't matter because I just had to get away. Because, you see, the whole terrible truth had become clear to me in that instant, clear by a kind of mind transfer, how the grader had cracked the concrete in which the aliens' ship was interred and freed their spirits—despite the Meyers' best effort to contain them—how its owner had been influenced to paint the thing black and write "Black Betty" on its frame (before later using it to run over his co-workers and finally to kill himself), even how they—the aliens, the bugs—had come to be here in the first place! And I couldn't take it— just couldn't take it—and ran through the snow straight back to Farmington, up to my bed, where I stayed all eve and most the next day, refusing to come down—even when they handed out the ice skates for our excursion the next night. Even when they picked the teams for the game at which Sister Bryant was—where Sister Bryant was, oh! Oh! (inaudible)

Dr. Daniels: *Shhh*. It's okay. Everything is okay. Let's just—I think that will be all for today. All right? You must be exhausted.

Westbrook: (inaudible) But it isn't okay. Because the fact is, Sister Bryant is dead. Worse, she's been ... oh, it's too horrible. And although you won't come out and say it ... you think I did it. Don't you?

Dr. Daniels: That's not for me to decide, Elle.

Westbrook: (inaudible) But you have decided— I can see it in your face. And not just for Sister Bryant ... but all of them. I wonder: has it ever occurred to you that I might have saved lives by doing what I did?

That I might have even stopped the killing? (inaudible) No? Well, maybe you'll think about that the next time. Goodnight, Ms. Daniels.

Dr. Daniels: Goodnight, Elle. Try to sleep well.

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STATEMENT OF MS. ELEANOR "Elle" Westbrook (January 18th, 3:30 PM, interviewed by Detective Ollie Rowe)

Detective Rowe: Okay. So. You say you had a plan from the instant you woke up—is that correct?

Westbrook: Yes, sir, since the moment Sister Bryant announced the hockey game—even though I pretended not to notice.

Detective Rowe: That would be the hockey game at Fenrow Park, next to Deep Lake—isn't that correct?

Westbrook: Yes, sir.

Detective Rowe: Which is why you returned to where the road grader was parked at on the eve of January 3rd, 2019, and proceeded to board it. Is that right?

Westbrook: Yes, that's right, at which time they began to speak to me just as before—the bugs, you understand—and told me to place my hands on the controls (the keys were still in it!), and that they would guide me from that point on—like a puppet, I suppose, or a marionette. For what they needed more than anything was my musculature, my bone and tendon, to drive the grader they had previously driven only with their minds. And I told them with my thoughts that I knew where many infestations could be killed all at once (for that's how they view us, as infestations, as a kind of cancer of the Earth; a *disease*) and we moved out, the black grader rattling and rumbling, belching plumes of smoke— its work lights winking on. Nor was it long before—

Detective Rowe: You came to Fenrow Park.

Westbrook: Yes. Because it's close to Farmington Hall. And I saw the lights almost immediately—the lights Sister Bryant had rented to light the game—and her, too, trudging through the snow toward the re-

strooms, bundled up like an Eskimo. And before I knew it the grader had accelerated toward her even though I tried to fight it and chased her all the way into the building, where it smashed into the masonry like a wrecking ball.

Detective Rowe: But she made it, did she not? Made it into the restrooms.

Westbrook: Oh, yes. Thank God. But then the gears started shifting and we were backing up—way up—not backing up and stopping, mind you, but backing up and launching forward again, circling around, so that we were parallel to the front of the building.

Detective Rowe: But, why? Why would you—why would they do that, Elle?

Westbrook: I didn't know! At least, not until the blade changed its orientation and became vertical—something I didn't even know it could do. Looking back I understand; it was going to shave off the front of the building. But then Sister Bryant stuck her head out (to see if it was clear, I suppose) and the gas pedal sunk to the floor, and we launched at her so fast that I didn't even realize what the bugs intended until the blade struck her neck and—and ...

Detective Rowe: And what, Elle? You must go on ...

Westbrook: And ... I don't want to. You know very well what happened after that.

Detective Rowe: I saw the aftermath, yes. If that's what you mean. But in fact, I don't know what happened; that's the point of all this. Now answer the question, please. What happened after the grader struck Sister Bryant?

Westbrook: (inaudible) I don't want ...

Detective Rowe: *What happened?*

Westbrook: She ... her ...

Detective Rowe: Tell me, you little monster! *What happened to Sister Bryant?*

Westbrook: *She was decapitated, okay?* The blade struck her in the neck and she was split like a cantaloupe and her head flew off and bounced off the blocks of the men's room and she ended up with blood all over her clean white habit and one eye staring up at us from the snow, okay? Are you happy now? Is that what you wanted to hear?

Detective Rowe: I want to hear the truth! I want to hear how a 15 year-old girl became a mass murderer over the course of mere weeks, and how she learned to drive that grader, even to expertly maneuver its—

Westbrook: I told you ... it was *them*. *The bugs*. They were behind everything, not just the grader but the car, too, that car that killed all those people just a few years ago, the black '66, the original Black Betty—the one owned by James Meyers and before that, a man named Crowley. They *bond* with machines, you understand, moving machines, just like they had a bond with their spacecraft, the one that came to Earth in 1966 and which is buried in the cement where the Meyers' house used to be—the one whose magnetic field might have destroyed the planet if they hadn't—

Detective Rowe: Enough! Admit it: You killed all those people and Sister Bryant too, and then you tried to kill the girls playing hockey, your own neighbors at Farmington, other orphans just like you. That's why you steered the grader toward the frozen lake ...

Westbrook: I *steered* it toward the lake precisely to avoid that, knowing it would break the ice before it ever reached them, knowing it would sink to the very bottom! And knowing, too, that without a machine to possess the bugs would simply dissipate, that they would scatter on the wind, never to endanger anyone again. And that's exactly what happened after the grader fell through, moaning like a keeled ship, groaning like a dinosaur—I know because I felt them, screaming and bickering amongst themselves, furious that they had misplayed their hands, their slimy, green, locust's hands!

Detective Rowe: I've heard enough. Just—just get her out of here.
(inaudible)

Detective Rowe: Just go, take her to the juvenile detention center. Hurry up.

(inaudible)

Detective Rowe: Sure. Send her on in.

(inaudible)

Dr. Daniels: Detective Rowe?

Detective Rowe: Yes, please, come on in. Have a seat.

Dr. Daniels: (inaudible) I take it that didn't go very well.

Detective Rowe: On the contrary, it went almost exactly as expected. Jesus. Just ...

Dr. Daniels: I'd try not to dwell on it. It'll make you crazy yourself. Besides (inaudible), I was told to give you this. Read it. It'll give you something to focus on.

Detective Rowe: It's the report on that chunk of concrete. The one at the demolished Meyers residence. Looks like they cracked it open, finally ... and ...

(inaudible)

Dr. Daniels: What?

Detective Rowe: I don't know ... looks like they found something—unusual. Something big. Something made out of ...

Dr. Daniels: What?

Detective Rowe: That's just it. They don't know.

Dr. Daniels: Isn't that strange?

Detective Rowe: Yeah. Yeah, it is.

Dr. Daniels: You look tired. How long has it been since you slept?

Detective Rowe: I don't even remember. (inaudible) What do you say, nightcap at Mortimer's?

Dr. Daniels: That sounds positively heavenly.

Detective Rowe: It does, doesn't it? Oh, and more thing.

Dr. Daniels: What? What is it?

Detective Rowe: You're closer than me: Turn off that fucking tape recorder.

Dr. Daniels: Oh, that. (inaudible) Don't mind if I—

The End

THE DEVIL DRIVES A '66

by
Wayne Kyle Spitzer

It's tempting to say, looking back, that it began with that warped wall—the wall in the basement garage which had been flat and firm when I'd first bought the house but had morphed into something misshapen and hideous. But in truth, it started with her voice, Mia's, a voice I would fall in love with—although, at the time, it existed only in my mind—a voice that had captivated me from the very first moment I heard it.

That would have been March 5, 2017, the day after they'd begun digging for the pool, when I'd taken to the deformed wall (which had been water damaged, I presumed, and was not part of the concrete foundation anyway) with a pickax—hacking away at it mercilessly until both the sheet rock and studs (which had been corrupted, as well) lay in ruins, and I was sitting on an inverted 5-gallon bucket, recovering, just staring at the exposed earth.

At least, until I heard that voice, which said to me, weakly, faintly, and yet somehow clear as a bell, *Please, Dear God. Help me. I have been buried alive.*

It's funny, because the first thing I thought of was a TV movie from the '70s—*The Screaming Woman*, about a girl found buried alive on a rich crone's property, and it's possible I mistook the voice for a memory of that, at least at first. But then it came again (once more managing to be faint yet clear as day), and I realized, finally, that it was not only real but emanating somehow from my own mind, as though I were not so much hearing it as transcoding it into a form I could understand. And what it said was: *Please ... there isn't much time. I'm not far, but as I have awakened, so have they. Now, use your pickax—I won't be hurt—and dig, dig!*

And, because I was captivated, that's what I did, approaching the earthen wall and swinging the ax again and again, grunting each time the blade struck the sediment, feeling the shock in my hands and arms whenever it hit a rock, until at last she cried, *Stop!*—and I stopped, wondering what had come over me that I should throw myself at the stones with such total abandon, or that I should suddenly feel as though I had the

strength of twenty men rather than one. At which instant the voice said, *Now, look. See.*

And I did, see that is, and realized that something was glinting, ever so slightly, through the dirt—something metallic, something man-made. Something which revealed itself grudgingly as I dropped the ax and began clearing away the moist, black earth ... until at last I was looking at a State of New York license plate, its blue and yellow colors seemingly vibrant as the day it was pressed, its characters personalized to read: BRN 2 KILL, and its black and white tab dated 3—for March—1966.

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AS IT TURNED OUT, WE finished our excavations—me and the pool guys—at about the same time; in no small part because they'd lent me their conveyor belt over the weekend, which enabled me to move earth from the garage into the payload of my truck as fast as I could dig it out. Not that I couldn't have managed without it—I felt *strong*, as I said, stronger than I'd felt in years, as if the car and the voice had somehow infused me with super-strength. Nor had my new vitality gone unremarked, especially at Home Depot—which I'd been haunting like a wraith, primarily for support beams—where I was asked more than once what supplements I'd been taking.

Regardless, 48 hours (and several dump loads to my friend's farm) later, it was done, and I was hosing off what a web search had told me was a 1966 Corvette Stingray hardtop, black and red, with a 435-horsepower/5,800 rpm V-8 engine and a sterling Peace symbol—which hung from its rear-view mirror like a charm. Nor was that all, for dangling from its ignition was a set of keys—one, presumably, for the trunk—along with a maroon rabbit's foot, or possibly a cat's, affixed to a silver chain.

Here I pause, in order to better render what I was feeling and what had carried me through the last couple days. For while it is true I began digging (beyond the wall, that is) in response to the girl's cry for help—believing, as I did, that a living person might yet be saved—it is

also true that that conviction faltered upon uncovering the 52-year-old plate, to the point that, considering the voice had fallen silent, I no longer expected to find a survivor—but a skeleton. I tell you this plainly so that you will understand why I didn't open the trunk immediately, and why, to be frank, I feared doing so. Rather, I believe it was the car itself that goaded me on during this time, growing as it was in power and actively suppressing Mia's attempts to communicate with me. Whatever it was, she must have at last found a way to break through, for as I opened the driver's side door and seated myself in the cockpit, I once more heard her voice, which said, as clearly as if she were standing next to me: *Hurry. Please. The keys. The trunk ...*

I paused, my fingertips kissing those very keys. The interior smelled of death, and decay, and something else—oily, pungent, like cilantro or burning tires, or a black beetle crushed underfoot. The truth is, I was terrified—what could the voice have been if not the ghost of someone buried with the car? And there was something else too, a completely different reason why I was so hesitant. And that was that—

I closed my thumb and forefingers on the keys, pushing in the clutch.

Don't do it! came the voice. Mia—their specimen. The butterfly they'd intended to collect. *That's what they want; what it wants. What the previous owner gave them. Resist—and open the trunk. We have work to do.*

But I hesitated.

And then came another voice—several others, actually, one after the other—which said, in a language older than words (but which I could understand): *Start it, James ... turn the key.*

Yes, yes, James. Continue the process.

Do it, James!

And I turned the key.

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THE TRUTH WAS, I HADN'T noticed how much attention my little digging project had garnered until I backed the rumbling, sputtering

‘Vette up and out of the garage—and found half the neighborhood looking on. I shouldn’t have been surprised; there were piles of dirt and stone everywhere—some of which had spilled onto the Merton’s lawn (and the Diller’s, too) and made tempting obstacles for boys on BMX bikes, not to mention that the conveyor running at 3 am would have undoubtedly stirred Miss Harper, who had once called 911 because a dog was barking. It’s hard to credit, in retrospect, how I’d avoided a visit from the cops. Maybe *they* had something to do with it. The bugs. Who knows.

Regardless, the kids waved and hollered as I backed onto the street and put it into gear, and I gave them a rev or two before easing up on the clutch and moving down the road, the radio giving me a start as it came on without warning (and without my having touched it) and began playing “Fortunate Son” by Creedence Clearwater Revival.

Then I was off, cruising the streets of Schenectady as though I hadn’t a care in the world, relishing it every time I drew alongside some kid in his Honda, speeding up a little as I handled corners, tapping the horn as I rumbled past female joggers. The truth of it is I was under the car’s spell, and didn’t think to question why the girl had fallen silent (again) or who—what—the other voices had been or how a car that had been buried for 52 years had simply rolled over and leapt to life. I felt young again, vibrant, strong, as though nothing could touch me and nothing could hurt; as though the logical part of my brain had simply turned off, as it does when you smoke a good blunt; as though I were in the clouds and nothing could bring me back. Indeed, I felt free of all human constraint and concern—at least, until I saw the Lyndon B. Johnson campaign sticker on the clean, chrome bumper ahead of me, and, realizing that both it and the Beetle to which it was attached were in as perfect condition as the ‘Vette—“Black Betty” it said on the ‘Vette’s door, I’d nearly forgotten about that—began to come out of it.

That’s when I really noticed it, the fact that the landscape immediately around the car had changed; that it had—*reverted*, somehow. I can only describe what I saw, which was that *none* of the vehicles at the

light could have been newer than a '66, and that the *light* itself looked decidedly retro, decidedly quaint, at least compared to the one only a block away. More, the storefronts alongside had changed, so that a Kinney Shoe Store now stood where a Taco Bell had just been, and a Woolworth had replaced an Indy Food Mart. Likewise, the pedestrians had changed—yoga pants giving way to miniskirts, athletic shoes giving way to go-go boots and winklepickers, short hair giving way to long. And it was as I observed these things that I noticed something else—the Stingray's reflection in the Woolworth's front windows, or rather, the reflection of something which was not the Stingray but which stood—hovered—in its place: a long, translucent, green-black thing, like an enormous wine decanter, only laid on its side, which glowed slightly from within its bulbous body and seemed to warp the very air around it, to bend it, to curl it like burnt paper.

What you see is the car's true form, came the voice, the girl's voice, Mia's, startling me with its clarity, seeming at once to be both inside my head and without, causing me to turn instinctively—revealing her to be sitting beside me, right there in the passenger seat. “... *and the field in which it operates. That field is weak now but it will grow. And the longer it remains free—the car, the artifact—the stronger it will become, until the world itself becomes threatened. Now do you see why I tried to warn you?*”

But I could only stare at her, even as the late afternoon sun caught her auburn hair—which was styled in a flipped bob—and seemed to set it on fire. *Beautiful*, I remember thinking, even though her eyes and skin were all wrong: bluish-gray, almost green; deaden, but in a very specific way, as though she had drown. “Look at yourself,” she said (actually said, it seemed, not communicated silently, like a specter), “Although its passengers are immune to the field it has already affected you—in other ways.”

I adjusted the rearview mirror to look at myself, and saw that she was at least partially correct: my skin was sallow—almost greenish—and there were dark spots beneath—

That's when I saw them. *The bugs*. Three of them, to be precise, scrunched up in the storage area beneath the fastback, each about the size of a chimpanzee, and each a kind of hybrid between a locust and a mantid.

It was all too much—the car that had been buried for 52 years yet started right up, the flashback to the 1960s and the ghostly girl, the bugs the size of dogs whose stench filled the cab and caused me to wretch. I gripped the door handle instantly—even as the little chrome knob dropped, locking me in. Then we were accelerating— abruptly, powerfully—whipping around the cars in front of us and blasting through the intersection: the girl vanishing, just winking out of existence, the bugs making a sound like crickets but magnified a hundred fold—the V-8 (or whatever it was) roaring.

Yes—yes, James. Want this, we do ...

Want it! Want it!

Right there, James. The infestation. Do it!

But I wasn't driving—

No, I could see that wasn't true: my foot was on the peddle just as sure as my hands were on the wheel. And that foot dipped suddenly even as the skateboarder came into view—his eyes widening, his free leg kicking—so that he disappeared into an alley even as we exploded past—fishtailing to a halt in the middle of the road, where the high-compression engine sputtered and the glass packs rumbled—before my foot once again hit the gas and we tore after him, burning rubber.

And then we were bearing down upon the kid, as he kicked and kicked furiously and glanced at us over his shoulder. As I looked in the rear-view mirror and saw the bug-things leaning forward (as though in anticipation). As I fought whatever impulse had taken over my limbs and partially succeeded—too late.

There was a *thud-crunch!* as he vanished beneath the hood—and the car bucked violently, as though I'd driven over a curb. I ground the brakes, glancing in the mirror—saw him tumble after us like a bag of lit-

ter. Only then, after I'd come to a complete stop, did it occur to me: I could see out the back window. The bugs were gone. The kid, meanwhile, was still alive—good God!—and thus it wasn't too late; I could still help him, still *save* him.

Yes, yes, James. Save him.

We're not finished yet, James.

Finish, finish!

I felt the gearshift in my hand—saw that I'd already put it in reverse and was stepping on the gas, letting out the clutch. And then the car launched backward—reversing straight as an arrow—until it bucked and rolled up onto the kid; and stopped.

"Please, mister," came the kid's voice—muffled, garbled—through my partially open window. "Please, God—"

But then my hand was shifting and the engine was roaring—the wide tires were spinning—and I saw through my side-view mirror that his blood was fanning the nearby bricks and a window—spraying them like rifle shot, spattering them with entrails, hurling pieces of bone against, and through, the glass—until the positraction gripped bare asphalt and the car leapt forward: roaring down the alley, skidding back onto the road, releasing its control over me.

At which moment Mia reappeared, like an apparition, and, rolling her milky eyes to face me, said, "Now will you listen? Now will you open the trunk?"

And then promptly faded away.

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THE KEY SLID IN SMOOTHLY and I paused, looking at the abandoned drive-in theater: at the rusted, canted speaker posts (the speakers themselves had long since been stolen) and the weeds bursting through the concrete berms; at the dilapidated concessions bar and the partially-collapsed steel fence. *Do it*, I told myself, and turned the key, hearing sirens in the distance as the trunk popped open, trying not to think

about the kid. As it turned out, it wasn't that difficult, considering what I found myself looking at.

They were arthropods, of course, and so appeared in death much as they'd appeared in life, although their eyes had long since rotted out and their shells had become gray as tombstones. But that's not what interested me so much as what was beneath them—which, having shoved them all to one side, I realized was a kind of—well, *egg*, for lack of a better term. A huge, glass egg—built into the car and full of a greenish, glowing liquid—within which, curled into a fetal position, floated a naked woman. A woman I recognized as Mia her-self.

Now do you understand? she asked, speaking directly into my head, directly into my mind—again, as though she were standing immediately beside me.

"No. No, I don't," I said, shaking my head in the dimming twilight. "Maybe you can explain it to me."

Get in the car, she said. And I will. All of it.

That's when I looked over the trunk lid I saw that she was back, just sitting in the passenger seat like a zombie, staring straight ahead at the screen. A screen, I might add, which had been restored—and over which danced images of hot dogs and fountain sodas and fresh-popped corn; of cotton candy and licorice twists.

For the drive-in, you see, had *warped*—just like the streetlight, just like the storefronts—and was operational once again. Operational and rapidly filling up—with cars, that was a given, old yet somehow brand-new—but also with people, at least some of whom would have been dead, or so it seemed likely to me, only a few scant moments ago.

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"TALK," I SAID, SHUTTING my door, settling in. "Starting with why you encouraged me to unbury the car—when you knew full well what could happen." I glanced at her in the dark. "And you *must* have known."

"I knew that their spirits—which are fused with the car, as is mine—would attempt to influence you, yes. What I did not know is the extent to which they'd succeed, how easily you'd succumb!" She seemed to shift gears: "It's not important. What is important is that the car gets reburied—deeper, further away. So that it may never threaten the surface again."

"But, what is it ... and who are they? Who are you, for that matter?"

"The car? Why, it's a spacecraft, of course. A *time*-craft. It has been matter-cloaked to mimic an automobile, that's all—of a make and model that was popular in the year they came. It was their way, I suppose, the bugs, of moving amongst us; of observing us at close range—at least, until they decided we should be exterminated. That's where I come in: their specimen. The sole butterfly they'd planned to harvest as an example of what they'd wiped out—for that's precisely what they'd initiated before a flu strain killed them all."

She laughed suddenly and what looked like the green fluid from the egg gurgled up out of her mouth. "The Common Cold, I suppose. Like in H.G. Wells. At least that's what Crowley thought, when he found them, that is."

"Who—"

"Crowley, the man who first discovered the car, full of bugs and rolled over in a ravine near Schenectady, in 1966. It was his theory that the foreigners had taken the appearance of humans while piloting the cloaked craft, but reverted to bugs after they'd died—either way, he knew right away that the 'Vette was no mere car. As for me and my egg, he hadn't a clue what to make of that. But the bugs spoke to him just as they've spoken to you; and before he knew it he'd stuffed them in the trunk and towed the car home and applied for title—he even had a personalized license plate made, 'BRN 2 KILL,' something to do with his service in Vietnam—as well as commissioning someone to paint 'Black Betty' on its door. But by November of that year he was done, and wanted nothing further to do with it, even going so far as to bury it in the

landfill he worked at, the Copperhead Earth Works, where he plowed it 6 feet under with his bulldozer and—”

“Copperhead?” I interjected, and thought instantly of Copperhead Farms, the name of the housing project which encompassed my new home. “How do you know all this?”

“I began to, project myself—sleepwalking, I call it—shortly after being preserved in the back of the ship. Nor do I know how that is possible. I only know that it is, and that I was able to monitor Crowley as he interacted with the car—although I could not yet communicate with him as I have with you. And it was during that time that I became aware of *them*, the bugs, but in spirit-form. I even learned how to intercept their thoughts, as I had Crowley’s. All of which brings me to why I reached out to you when you began to dig—”

“You wanted to be free,” I said, feeling as though I suddenly understood her, suddenly got it. “Either by death or by rescue ... you wanted to be free.”

“In part, yes. Of course. But also because the car was insufficiently buried, insufficiently interred. It was bleeding through the sediment, you understand. Because what the bugs started before falling ill is still underway—an exponential charge, using the ship’s warp field as a weapon of mass destruction. And as I’ve said, the longer the car remains free, the stronger it will become ... until at last all life on Earth will be threatened. And before you ask, the answer is no, it cannot be destroyed, not without detonating it at its present charge, which would still be enough to destroy half the planet.”

I moved to speak but paused, letting it go.

“That’s what I meant when I said we had work to do. We *have* to find a way to re-bury this car. And re-bury it for good. And for that you’re going to need help—real help, not a disembodied voice. Or a ghost. And so I am asking you to at least try to set me free. But in order to do so you’ll have to *see*, and I mean see in a way you’ve never seen before. I’ll show you. I—I have faith in you, James. I know you can do it.”

And then she placed her hand over mine and it faded into my skin, and I got out and went to the trunk.

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I'D JUST TOLD HER THAT, because of her help, I could see—actually *see* the alien-looking control panel (which before I'd missed), when a youthful male voice said, behind me: "Excuse me, sir?" —and I spun around.

What is it, James? What's going on?

And found myself facing a security guard—one right out of 1960s—peaked hat, whistle, Billy club, and all.

"Y—yes?" I stammered, easing down the trunk lid, stepping away from the car. "Can I help you?"

He aimed his flashlight, a ribbed, chrome thing which looked positively primitive, into the empty cab.

"It's just funny," he said, "because I could have sworn I heard you talking to someone—in the trunk of your car. Just now, as I was coming up the aisle."

He paused, sizing me up. "You know, a lot of people seem to think that ripping us off by sneaking people in through the trunk is just good, clean fun." He unhooked the radio from his belt and placed it near his lips. "But 3.50 a carload means just that—3.50 *per carload*." He keyed his mic. "K-91 to K-54, where are you?"

"Look, can't we just—"

Get in the car, James.

"I mean, I'm a little old to be sneaking—"

Get in the car, James!

"Stay right where you are, sir. K-91 to K-54: Request back-up in section A. *Excuse me, sir ...!*"

But I was already getting in the car, turning the ignition—revving the engine as Barney Fife rushed to my door and began yanking the handle—which I'd locked—putting it in gear.

“Get us out of here,” said Mia, having re-appeared in the passenger seat. “*Go, go, go!*”

And then we’d backed up and swung around and were beginning to launch forward, the ‘Vette’s engine roaring, its rear tires spinning, until we blasted between the rows and I began searching for the exit, the skinny guard gradually giving up the chase, people running helter and skelter out of our way.

Yes, yes, James! Infestation!

Kill them, kill them!

Wipe them from the Earth ...

The bugs again—reaching into my mind, seizing control of my hands—as the radio sputtered to life and the Beatles began singing: *Well, shake it up, baby, now (Twist and shout) Come on, come on, come on, baby, now (Come on and work it on out ...)*

My hands jerked the wheel as a man in a suit ran out in front of us and we struck him like a hammer—causing him to tumble up over the hood, splay against the windshield, where his bloodied face pressed against the glass. *Well, work it on out, honey ...* The wipers activated even as I slammed on the brakes and he slid off, then we were accelerating again, rolling over the top of him, as Mia screamed and the bugs ticked and cackled, as the Beatles sang, *You know you got me goin’ now (Just like I knew you would ...)*

“Fight it, James! Resist them!” cried Mia—even as the car bounced up and over a berm and the Peace symbol hanging from its mirror swung. As it targeted a woman with an enormous beehive and rammed into her at full speed—knocking her at least twenty feet, trampling over the top of her, leaving her a bloody ruin.

“Get it together, man! Concen—oh, no. *Oh, no!*”

I followed her gaze as we fishtailed around the end of the front row and accelerated toward the screen, saw the children begin to scatter as we bore down upon the playground.

Do it, James, do it!

Faster, faster!

I fought the wheel but it had taken over completely—steering for the running kids, seeming almost to growl at me, jerking against my grip. The cab shook as we piled over the railroad ties at the edge of the playground and began tearing through the sand, aiming at a little boy even as the headlights popped up and drowned him in harsh light, as the glass packs roared and the Peace symbol swung.

“James!”

And something just—kicked in. I still can’t explain it. But for a fraction of a second I was able to just, *merge* with the car—with the ship. All I know is that for that fraction of a second we were one: one entity, one organism. And as I applied the brakes and swung the wheel the car responded, fishtailing and skidding to a stop in the sand ... where it idled roughly as I looked at Mia and she looked at me. And it was at precisely that moment that an idea came to mind—an idea I thought just might work. If we could get there in time. If I could maintain control of the car.

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IT WASN’T EASY, COMMUNICATING with the car, ordering it to lower its warp field; nor was it completely successful—the family we’d left twisted and mutated at a stoplight, partially fused with their car, was proof of that. Nor did we stop anymore after that but instead rumbled straight for my house, ignoring every sign and limit, rushing against the clock, praying we could make it before my concentration finally gave out and we were back in the ‘60s—back where we’d killed so many and the cops were surely looking for us. Back where the bodies lay scattered and broken everywhere we’d been.

“Hang on!” I shouted as we broke through the fence and hurtled toward the pool excavation—forgetting, for the moment, that Mia was yet a kind of ghost, and that if anyone need worry about the coming impact it was me. And then I was throwing open the door and rolling up on the ground—as the ‘Vette which was not a ‘Vette launched off a dirt

berm (left over from the pool dig) and crashed into the pit, its steel frame seeming to howl like a wounded beast and its fiberglass crunching and breaking, its windows shattering ...

Hurry, James. The cement truck ...

“But you’re still in the car!”

And it’s possible I’ll remain there. The world, James ... The world comes first.

I cursed, staring into the pit. At the Stingray, which had begun to glow and to morph. At *Black Betty* ... a bitch if ever there was one. Then I hurried to the cement truck and, to my great relief, found the keys still in the ignition (we’d become friends, after all, the contractor and I, nor was it a bad neighborhood). But I was not alone as I started it up and activated the mixer, for in addition to Mia the bugs were still in my head, louder than ever and seeming to sense what was at stake. *Angry*, for that was their nature, but terrified, too. Vulnerable at last.

Don’t do it, James. You mustn’t do it ...

Return, return. Drive us some more.

The girl, James. You must save the girl!

I looked at the pit as it began to fill up with concrete, frowning, then scrambled from the truck and into the hole, my shoes squelching in the cement, my heart racing, as I opened the door and retrieved the keys. As I hurried to the trunk and popped it open.

But the alien control panel was no longer there, which is to say I could no longer see it given the maelstrom in my head, the energy I was expending to thwart the ship’s warp field. And it *was* becoming a ship again, that much was clear, as though the bugs’ fear and vulnerability had weakened it and compromised its ability to multitask. As though their hatred of us and of the human race had trumped every other single thing. The charge had to be perpetuated; I could practically hear it in the air. The purge had to continue—even if it was from beyond their own graves!

And then a miracle occurred, one Mia and I talk about to this very day, although really it was just the result of the green-black ship losing its bizarre cloak: for as the wet cement reached my knees and threatened to overwhelm the trunk, the control panel reappeared, at which instant I was able to access the bugs' minds—for Mia's abilities had rubbed off on me in a way we still don't understand—enough to depress the right sequence and cause the egg to open, its greenish fluid flooding the ship's surface as Mia inhaled violently and coughed up yet more liquid—the bugs chattering and cursing indecipherably as the concrete reached for my thighs. And then, somehow, somehow, I was able to scoop her into my arms and climb out of the pit, although, again, the fact that I was able to do so remains a mystery to us even today. Perhaps it was just love and the power it can confer. For I *did* love her, of that much I was certain. And I wasn't about to abandon her to another eternal limbo.

All I know is that at some point the pit had been filled and I'd successfully shut down the mixer, and that we'd stood there for what seemed a long time just watching the cement cure and feeling grateful for our lives. Nor was it a time for celebration considering how much pain and suffering the thing had caused; but rather a time to reflect and meditate and yes, to pray.

Pray that no one ever came and dug the cursed thing out.

Pray that the bugs, whatever they were and wherever they were from, would never send another.

The End
