



BY: DAVID SWAN

Marni's black night had finally fallen. On a nameless road, miles from the nearest speck of a town, the darkness sat thick and unbroken, not even a porch light shining through. Behind the locked door of the bathroom in the single-wide, hunched over the toilet, she cupped her phone in her hands, blinking at the screen.

She couldn't see too well because her right eye, the better one, was purple-red and swollen almost shut. But since Kyle went to work hungover and got fired, and the diner where she waitressed had to close, they'd been together 24/7. She could hardly step outside without him yelling and calling her back. She had no other chance, no time to be unseen, except when the heavy, moonless night offered comfort and cover.

Her fingers flying, Marni searched *grounds for divorce* as the lawyer at the women's center had told her. She stared at the results, thinking she'd hit the jackpot: *cruel treatment, habitual intoxication, habitual drug addiction, an act of violence*. She wondered if she could claim desertion even though he came back after she miscarried. A *prison sentence of at least two years* didn't help: he only did six months for the meth, plus three for the unlicensed gun. His latest assault on her face had gone unrecorded, unpunished.

She was almost finished when he stirred. Her trembling hand hovered over Clear Screen, then clicked Send. Grasping the knob like an eggshell, she opened the bathroom door, tiptoed toward the bed, and got under the covers. For once, she was glad to hear the low, rumbling snore that signaled he was passed out.

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"Ma-arrn, where you at?" She hated being called that all the time, the way he dropped a syllable and dragged out the rest so it wasn't even her name. "Out here," she replied from the little yard behind the trailer where she was taking clothes off the line.

Kyle hardly looked up as she walked by with the laundry. In the bedroom, she leaned toward the mirror, her face almost touching the glass. The scar was nearly gone from her eye, but her forehead was a tangle of worry lines, her formerly rich black hair receding at the temples.

She had to work to push her mouth into a smile, especially since she had no cause for one. The lawyer had promised the papers in two weeks and it'd been almost three. That night the blackness felt like a weight instead of a friend, pressing her down in bed, in a box where she'd never break out.

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She felt her phone vibrate and sneaked a glance. A little later, Kyle was about to put away the Jack when she laid her hand on his shoulder and said, "Have another one. I'll join you."

He grinned. "Whoo-hoo! We get to drinkin' you know what's gonna happen." It did and was as ugly as ever, but as she'd hoped, he fell asleep within seconds afterward. The papers would be there in the morning. She had to be gone right now.

Marni dressed, picked up the bag she'd discreetly filled with jeans, shirts, and underwear, slipped out the door and into her rusted red Chevy Cobalt. Her pulse pounding and her foot on the brake, she turned the key partway and put the gear in neutral. The car rolled slowly and silently over the driveway to the pavement, where she turned onto the road's gentle downslope.

She waited in frozen time, not wanting to start the engine until she was out of earshot. Then the darkness exploded and the rear window shattered. Marni screamed and ducked. Glancing back, she saw Kyle standing in the road, shouting curses and aiming his pistol with both hands.

Marni slammed her foot on the gas, the car rocketing forward as the second bullet whined past the window. Swallowing her heart, she raced down the narrow, twisting road toward the state highway as fast as she dared. She heard a big motor and was almost blinded as Kyle's F-150 shot around a curve and the lights flooded the mirror. The big silver truck smacked the rear of the Cobalt, then fell back as Marni fought for control.

Kyle had his arm out the window, gun in hand. His engine revved and the pickup charged forward, but just before impact she swerved into the empty left lane. The F-150 scraped her fenders and roared past, then the right front wheel lost the shoulder and the truck flew off the road, the sound of ripping, cracking metal, and terrified screams filling the night. Marni braked and shuddered to a stop, gazing at the pickup flipped over in the ditch, wheels in the air.

Kyle's cry rose from the wreck. "Marn, help me, I'm bleeding. Jesus, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Like she'd never heard that. "Ohhh no, oh God I can't move."

She closed her eyes and exhaled but didn't budge. "Marn, where are you?" His voice was getting weaker. "I need you, please, please get help." She pulled herself out of the car and leaned on it while her knees quit shaking. The voice dropped off to a piteous, "Mami... Maaarrrr-nee-eee...."

She started to cross the road, then stopped. There was no one in sight, no sirens in the distance, and now no sound from the truck. She didn't need the shelter of the night anymore. And she didn't have to run.

Almost casually, not hurrying, Marni got back behind the wheel and settled in for a long trip. She soon reached the highway, then the interstate, the terror fading with every mile as she remembered how to feel free. Daylight found her west of Biloxi with tears of relief in her eyes, the blue Gulf water at her side, and the morning sun at her back.

Dave Swan is a blogger, editor, former journalist, and lifelong writer. His work has appeared in the *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, the *Birmingham Arts Journal*, and the *Red Fez*.

