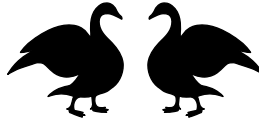


DARK-HAIRED GIRL IN A RED PICKUP TRUCK



After Connor's marriage broke up, he went through some weird kind of mid-thirties binge, something he described later as "my suicide bomber period," with the emphasis on *suicide*. "It was eight or nine months, I guess, maybe a year," Connor says. "Some kind of kamikaze thing. I was going down and didn't care who I took with me." He used his broken heart to break hearts right and left. He locked up his darkroom with the cameras inside. "What was the point?" he says. Connor missed two deadlines on a corporate training video and stopped returning calls on his business line. He bounced checks. He ate crackers and peanut butter and sardines because he'd stopped grocery shopping. He was drinking a lot, and he had never been a drinker. He went around numb. Nothing fazed him. "Suicide bomber," Connor says now. "I was a zombie."

So. On Halloween he slipped his black jacket on backwards and turned his black vinyl pants inside out and pulled on gray wool gloves with the fingertips cut out, and he powdered his face with cornstarch, pale white, like a geisha's. He began drinking at dusk, fell in with folk who seemed to recognize him, and followed them from one party to another. At some point someone handed him a pink pillowcase stuffed with trick-or-treat candy. Connor ate some and handed some out. "I'm a generous drunk," he said. Various women in costume—hookers, witches, strippers, cats, Playboy bunnies—lent an ear to his tale of woe: The girl he loved most in the world had left him for a man in a red pickup truck. A ballerina in a blue tutu consoled him, stroking his pale

powdered cheek. Later—perhaps at a different party; he didn't know—he inserted himself into a discussion of his impaired motor skills. His new friends made him close his eyes and touch his nose, they made him recite tongue twisters, they tried to make him hand over his car keys. “Y'all are haranguing me,” Connor said. “Y'all are just a bunch of haranguers.” “Dude, you are not driving home—do you want to get arrested?” someone said, and Connor thought, *Why not?* He decided there was a certain appeal to being thrown in jail, a temporary and not-unpleasant loss of autonomy, something like an unexpected hospital stay. “Yes,” he said. “I do. Where can I get arrested? Arrest me.” “Why don't you give me your car keys?” a pretty she-devil asked him sweetly, poking him with her plastic pitchfork. “Why don't you go to hell?” Connor said and laughed and couldn't stop laughing. A moment later a sumo wrestler and a fat clown pinned his arms behind him while a harem girl with bare belly riffled through his pants and extracted his keys; Connor cursed them, all three.

“The stupid thing was that I hadn't even driven my car,” Connor says, remembering. He had no idea where his car was or at what point he'd starting riding with other people. He doesn't remember leaving the party; one moment he was inside, faces spinning around him, and the next found him out on the dew-damp lawn. Under a buzzing streetlight, he threw the sack of candy over his back and headed toward home.

An hour later Connor was at a derelict bus stop, standing on the loose lace of his shiny untied shoe and staring at the ragged shards of a broken pumpkin scattered at his feet—some kind of sidewalk augury he couldn't read. He had dredged up a handful of candy corn from the pillowcase with the intent of flinging it at the first red pickup truck he saw, but since no such vehicle had appeared, he had scored direct hits on two substitute targets—a beat-up Buick and an SUV—and neither had stopped or even slowed down; it was that kind of neighborhood. “Just keep driving,” Connor muttered. “How about a little help, dammit? I'm trying to get arrested here.”

He fisted some ammo into his mouth, those sharp orange deltoids, like knocked-out jack-o-lantern teeth.

He had just sat down on the bus stop bench when a pickup truck hove into sight. It was just a big chuffing shape in the gloaming, but it was red, Connor knew it was red. He stood and dug into his bag, then flung a handful of candy, which rattled off the passing truck like buckshot. “Bastard,” Connor shouted.

The pickup stopped. Red taillights popped like flashbulbs, then the white backups snapped on. The truck rolled back two feet, and the right-hand door swung wide.

“Get in,” she said.

“Of course I thought it was Rhonda,” Connor says now. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I?” The last time he’d seen her, she was swinging a suitcase into the bed of a red pickup truck; some guy whose face he couldn’t see had leaned from the driver’s side and opened the door for her, and she got in and was gone. “So now I’d dreamed her back, come to beg my forgiveness in her new beau’s pickup. *Suicide* bomber. I got in. Why wouldn’t I?”

He hopped up on the bench seat and looked at the driver: short blond hair streaked with pink, a glittery pink-and-black eye mask, a pink dress with shimmering wings sewn to the back. On the seat between them lay a magic wand, a crystal rod with a gold star attached.

“Shit,” Connor said. “Pardon me.”

“For what?” she said.

“I thought you were someone else,” he said, and he started to get out.

“I probably am someone else,” she said. “You need a ride somewhere?”

“It’s okay,” Connor said. “I’m waiting for a bust.” He laughed. “Did I say bust? I mean *bus*. Bus bus bus bus.”

“Well, you’re in luck. This is a bus. Where are you headed?”

“What the hell kind of bus is this?”

“It’s a drunk bus. It takes drunks home. Where are you headed?”

“Home?” he said, a little uncertainly.

“Good. Close the door.”

Connor thought about it. “Maybe the door stays open,” he said. “‘Cause maybe I might have to eject on short notice.”

The fairy or angel or whatever she was leaned across him and pulled the door shut. The crown of her head bumped his chin and her breast brushed across his biceps. Her scent was citrus and soap. Connor realized he smelled of beer and secondhand smoke. She told him to put on his seatbelt.

“I put it on,” Connor says. “I thought about it for a minute, and then I did what she told me.”

She put the truck in gear. She looked in the rear-view mirror, pulled out into the street, then cut her eyes at Connor. Calmly she said, “So just because it’s trick-or-treat, you think you have the right to crank a bunch of gravel at my truck?”

“I was trying to get arrested,” Connor said. Some inner portion of his mind

knew how lame this sounded. He scrunched his face up. "It seemed like a good idea at the time," he said.

"Have you ever been arrested?"

"No."

"It's not a good idea," she said, downshifting for a stoplight, "at any time."

"Oh," Connor said.

"But if you don't believe me, I can drop you up here at the police station, and we'll see how you like it."

Connor saw they were passing a parking lot full of cop cars. Two cops were standing on the sidewalk in front of a large well-lit building. "She pulled the truck over," Connor says. "Just pulled it over and rolled down the window and leaned over me again, and I was stuck between her and the cops."

"Excuse me, officers," she said.

They ambled over. Connor slumped and looked down.

"Sorry to bother you. I think I need to report a crime."

"What's the trouble?" one cop said, and the other said, "Ma'am?"

"What's the penalty for throwing rocks at moving vehicles?"

"We don't determine penalties, ma'am," the first cop said. "The courts do that." And the second cop said, "Somebody been throwing rocks at your truck?"

She put her hand on Connor's thigh and leaned a little further out his window. "Would you say at least that the vandal would have to spend the night in jail?"

Connor began to feel he hadn't been paying enough attention.

"We could arrange that," one of the cops said.

"Is this the guy who did it?" the other cop said.

"This is him."

"Wait," Connor said.

"What's he doing in your truck, ma'am?"

The first cop shook his head, wiped a hand over his face, and stalked off toward the station-house doors. The other cop unhooked a Maglite from his belt and shined it on Connor's face. "This lady says you threw a rock at her truck. What's your story?"

"Mistaken identity," Connor mumbled.

"Are you drunk?"

Connor shrugged. Demand me nothing, he thought. Just arrest me and get it over with. He blinked stupidly in the bright light. The cop sighed.

"I tell you the truth, ma'am, it's been one of those nights. We broke up a

couple of costume parties that got out of hand, and there's been a lot of drunk driving too. I've already arrested fourteen people. Now I can arrest him too, but I won't do it unless you agree to press charges. Are you willing to do that?"

Connor held his breath. "Literally," he said later. "It was like everything slowed down right there and then. Like the dashboard clock had stopped." He realized suddenly in that sober still moment that he *didn't* want to get arrested. "I told myself I'd been a damn idiot."

"Ma'am? Do you want to press charges?"

Connor was watching her face in the dashboard light. He turned his head away. Her magic wand lay glittering on the seat beside him.

"I'll think about it," she said.

"You'll *think* about pressing charges?"

"Sure."

"And what are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Take him home?"

The cop waved them away, disgusted.

They drove a few blocks without speaking. Connor, finding himself strangely lucid, thought he ought to say thank you, but he also felt he'd been toyed with, that she'd had no intention of getting him arrested. She was just trying to prove a point, he thought, though he couldn't say what that point was. Maybe a power trip thing. He put his shoes on the dashboard in front of him.

"Don't do that, please," she said. "You'll scuff the dash."

He took his feet down. They were cruising by the hospital now, the halogen-lit parking lot down to a few forlorn cars. The moon was a low sharp scythe just above the horizon. Connor sneezed. "Anyway it wasn't rocks," he said.

"What wasn't?"

"You said I threw trucks at your rock. But it wasn't rocks. It was candy corn."

"Why candy corn?" she asked.

"Because I was drunk?"

"And why are you drunk?"

Oh hell, Connor thought. He had every right to be drunk, he told her, and he started to explain why. He heard his voice become bitter and maudlin. She listened for a few minutes then cut him off: "Man, don't go down that road. You've got to let that go. That's all. You're being childish."

Her tone was gentle, but Connor still felt peeved. “Maybe I have every right to be childish.”

“You have every right to be however you want. But why would you want?”

“I just feel like it.”

“Stop crying over her—stop thinking she’ll come back.”

“She might,” Connor said.

“Yeah, she might, that’s true. But if she does, it won’t be the same—you know it won’t—so you’re a fool to wish for it. What are you supposed to be anyway?”

Connor was confused. Heartbroken? he thought. Crazy? “What do you mean?”

“What is that costume?”

“Zombie?” he said, not quite sure.

“Zombie? How is that a zombie?”

“I’m a zombie. I just am.”

“Zombies eat human flesh. Not candy.”

“I wasn’t eating candy. I was throwing it.”

She stopped for another red light. “Zombie. A lot of people use the word loosely. You know what a zombie is?”

“Tell me.”

“A zombie is a body without a soul.”

“A corpse.”

“Not a corpse. Zombies are alive, or at least animated. They walk around. They can throw candy.”

Connor considered this, then, pointing to her getup, asked what she was supposed to be.

“Human flesh, that’s what I am. That’s what you are too.”

She reached up and stripped off her pink and blond wig, and Connor saw that her real hair was brown and lovely in the dim light. She tossed the wig on the dash and said, “A dark-haired girl in a red pickup truck is a sign that even a zombie like you ought to be able to interpret.”

Connor mulled it over.

They passed the power station, they rolled by the ruined church, they cruised down the long brown hill and across the river. Connor couldn’t understand how she knew where he lived, and said so.

“Because I’ve been there before.”

“You know me?”

“I keep track of zombies, Connor.”

To save his life he couldn't think of her name or even remember seeing her before.

“Everything is all confused,” he said.

The dark-haired girl pulled up, truck chuffing, to his driveway. “Some advice,” she said. “Number one: Never throw anything at anybody's vehicle, especially a vehicle equipped with rifle racks. That's just a dumbass thing to do.”

“Yeah,” Connor agreed. “Okay.”

“Number two: you are not a zombie. You are human flesh. Don't forget that. Now go get some sleep.”

“Seems like there ought to be a number three,” Connor said.

“Some other night.” She nodded toward his house: *go on*.

“Wait a minute. I want you to tell me who you are.”

Connor saw her smile in the dashboard light. It seemed for a moment that she might lift her mask, but she didn't. “A friend of a friend,” she said, and that was all she'd say.

A couple of dogs—one white, one yellow-orange—broke from the shadows and raced across his moonlit front yard. They streaked by so fast and disappeared so suddenly that Connor couldn't be sure they had really been there. The dark-haired girl leaned across his lap to open his door for him; again he smelled fruit and sandalwood. He asked her if she'd like to come in. She said they both knew it was best if she didn't. “How about lunch tomorrow?” he asked.

“Goodnight,” she said.

He groped through his nearly empty pillowcase, then left her with a Hershey's kiss.