

"These are desperate times," my wife Dora told me, "so it's time we do a desperate thing."

My name is Jubal Northern and I want you to know from the get-go that when I walked into that 7-11 I didn't plan on using that gun. All I needed was money for Thelma's abortion. Dora asked me to do her sister Thelma a favor. I'd been laid off for some months now and was biding my time until the big money came my way, although I'd heard that the Winosha Springs Job Service was taking guard applications for the new prison. But I wasn't desperate. Not like Dora was desperate for her sister. "Just go in there and get money," Dora told me. "It's nothing."

I went to the 7-11 just before dawn on Tuesday right around 5:30. The sun hadn't come up yet and there was a darkness all around. I walked into the store and pulled the gun. No one else was around. I asked for the money politely. I didn't want to cause a big stir. Dora made sure the gun's clip was loaded but that didn't matter because I didn't plan on using it.

I knew they rigged those stores with alarms and I knew the girl behind the counter pressed the alarm switch when she looked up at me with her dark blue eyes and took a deep slow breath. She just stood there in her little red 7-11 shirt. She stood with her denim butt against the far counter top, looking up at me and my gun with dumb eyes, shaking. Her blonde hair shook, her fingers shook, her little mouth shook.

"Open it," I told her. I pounded my fist down on the counter. "Or I gotta use this." I pointed the gun at her face and took a slow bead on her sweaty forehead. She started crying, sobbing softly, and right then I could see braces wired in her front teeth. I thought: Shit, if her boyfriend could see her now. He'd see a pretty little woman without a good-looking thing about her.

Then I chuckled, right there in front of her. I

knew a woman like this is pretty on the outside—a real cheerleader type—but deep inside her heart, beneath all the make-up and clothes, she's the kind of woman you have to watch out for. She's the kind of pretty woman who might latch onto you just because you have money. Because you have something she doesn't. This woman behind the counter, I thought, is the kind who would lead you on and then, when you think things are going all right, she'd up and leave with someone else. You'd wake up one morning and find yourself alone. Then she'd send you a postcard from a different state saying how it was never meant to be. I knew these women. She was just like my first wife, Twyla.

But I calmed myself. I nudged the gun closer to her face. She wore a sparkly green eyeshadow and dark red lipstick. "Open it," I said. "Or I'm gonna—"

But Debbie—that was her name, I could see her nametag now—Debbie said, "I can't." She started to breathe hard and furious, one breath right after the other. "There ain't no money in it. I just slipped it all in the safe."

"Open the motherfucker!" I yelled, and thought my throat was going to burst because it hurt so much. Then I thought: Christ, this is useless. So I hit the buttons on the cash register. I hit four or five buttons, thinking one must surely open the drawer. But it beeped. The cash register beeped at me. I hit another button and it beeped again. Beep, beep.

"I got a little boy," Debbie said. "I got—" She was looking at me the way a baby might look at its mother, all wide-eyed and innocent. "You hear me? I can't give you what I don't got." Debbie seemed to be moving in slow motion. Her arms were out in front of her body, palms up and bobbing slightly.

But at that point I was too excited to think about her boy. I kept reminding myself that things was gonna be bad between me and Dora if I didn't get this money. "Open it! Open the drawer!" I banged on it again. Beep. Beep. Beep, it

went. Beep.

"Godammit," I whispered. "Damn this," I said, and took a shot out across the store to show I meant business. A bag of Cheetos burst open and the sliding glass door of the liquor cooler cracked and shattered. The gun jolted my arm in a violent way, and in the quiet hush after the shot all I could hear was the echo in my ears.

"Now," I whispered. "You gonna do it?"

Debbie stared at me. She looked ready to open it. She looked ready to press the buttons and pop open the drawer. But she just started crying. A high-pitched, long winded cry came from the back of her throat like some kid who'd just been yelled at.

I squeezed off several more rounds across the store and watched the Ding Dongs and Cheerios and cake mixes all powder into smoke clouds of debris. When I looked back at Debbie, I saw that she wasn't standing at the counter no more. I looked over and saw her belly down on the rubber footmat and red linoleum, her hands covering the back of her head, shaking. I knew then I'd scared her good and now it was up to me.

But the phone rang. I wondered who the hell it was who'd call a 7-11 store before even six o'clock in morning. I hit the cash register as hard as I could. Then I squeezed off another round into the back of the register. Sparks flew up and wires hissed. The phone rang again. Then the cash register started beeping, one long beep. It wouldn't stop beeping. I knew from experience that busted up high-tech circuit boards yielded nothing but headaches and hassles. So I knew it was useless.

I walked quickly out into the parking lot, and right before the glass door closed, I heard the phone ring again.

I got into my Buick and slammed the door. My gun hand was shaking in a bad way. I popped the clip out the pistol grip and saw that it was empty. It smelled sweet, like burning cordite or the smell after a lightning storm. Then I

snapped it back in and tossed the gun on the passenger seat. I started the engine, revved it a few times, and fishtailed onto Highway 24.

When I pulled into my driveway and saw the single light on in the kitchen, I knew Dora was up and waiting for the money. But I felt all right. The prairie and fields were blue with dawn light. The sun was an orange sliver tucked behind the treeline, and thin white mist hung above the soybean stubble. If I hadn't had to do all this, I could've stood there a while longer and breathed the cool, moist air, and looked all around the fields, and out to the radio antenna blinking red and yellow in the distance. I could've sat up on the hood of my Buick and tilted my head back and let the thick, sweet smell seep into my nose. But I knew well enough that this was no time for nature's goodness.

Dora was sitting in the kitchen in her white bathrobe. Her hair hung in thin strands over her forehead. Her fingers were laced around a coffee cup as if she was warming her palms. The collar of the bathrobe was up slightly, and hid part of her jaw. I had given the bathrobe to Dora for her birthday. She told me that most women had bathrobes, so it was important. I bought it at Montgomery Wards the day before her birthday for twenty dollars. She wanted a red ankle length one, but it was sixty dollars. It was a designer label, Klein's or Kostner's or something. Personally, I never owned but Levi's and J.C. Penny's work shirts, so I was in no way going to shell out that kind of money for an expensive red piece of cloth that was no better than a cheaper one from Wards. So I bought the white one. I even paid to have it wrapped. The fat lady at the gift wrapping counter wrapped it in silver with cream strips and stuck a blue bow on it. That damn package was pretty, and I went into our kitchen that afternoon feeling good. Dora was at her sister Thelma's, and I set the package right on the table so she'd see it when she came in. I thought it was the best present I'd ever given her,

the box sitting there in the afternoon light all silver and cream and blue. That night Dora came to bed dressed in the bathrobe. "Happy birthday," I whispered, and touched her. "Happy birthday, Dora." But she only looked at me and said, "I wanted the red one, Jubal." Then she rolled over and fell asleep that night all covered up in her new bathrobe.

I stood there in the kitchen breathing heavy and thinking about that blonde Debbie standing behind the 7-11 counter. Bacon sizzled on the stove. The light all around was a fluorescent blue. Dora looked at me with an ill face. Her green eyes were wide and her mouth was open.

"Jubal, Jesus," she said, and stood up and moved in front of me. She was my height. We looked eye to eye. "You get the money?" She took my two hands and studied me, my face, my chest, as if to examine what sort of effect the robbing of a 7-11 might have on me. She stood so close to me I could smell the sweet fragrance of her strawberry shampoo and the dull, morning scent of her body.

"The money, Jubal," she said, looking right at my eyes. "You get the money?"

I said nothing, just stood there looking at her. My mouth was probably open and I would imagine my face looked as ill and pale as hers. "Where's the money?" Then she started sticking her fingers into my coat pockets. "Where's the money?" I felt her palm press against my breast pocket. She was getting frantic, her voice was getting louder. "Did you get it?" She stopped suddenly and stared at me, her face calm. Then, as if stricken with a bad pain, her nose crinkled, her eyes squinted, her mouth turned into a frown, and she hit my chest with both her palms. "Jubal dammit," she said, "you didn't get it." Now she was hitting my chest with her fists. "Thelma's running outta time, Jubal."

This sister of Dora's, Thelma, lived along the Mississippi riverbank in one of those houses on stilts. Down at Lucky Jim's Bar and Boat Club I had heard some bad stories

about Thelma and her wanton dating habits, but did not know much first hand except she already had a four year old boy named Danny and was in no mood to have another. Both Dora and Thelma worked in the carpenter shop at Iverson's, the sheet metal fabrication plant this side of town. They worked second shift — seven in the am until three-thirty in the afternoon.

I knew that Thelma was going with a man named Bobby Timpani, one of her neighbors along the Frontage Road. And I'd heard that Thelma's first husband, Marlon P. Pratt — a bald man who waxed his moustache tips — he left two days after Danny was born and took nothing but Thelma's pea-green Dodge Charger and Citibank Visa. Dora and Thelma were funneling a large majority of their Iverson's earnings to help pay off Marlon's six state credit card spree. Word has it Marlon's in Montana now, shacked up at a dude ranch with a woman named Mildred, the both of them shovelling horseshit for some rich West-Texas financier. Thelma said she had some money in the bank but not nearly enough to cover the abortion fee on account of recent car payments on her rusted-out El Camino and Marlon P. Pratt being seven months behind on his child-support.

Dora hit me again. "Stop it," I said, and grabbed my wife by the shoulders. "Stop it right now." My thumbtips dug into the front of her shoulders and I felt bone. I pushed her away. She stumbled backward, all her limbs as limp as the limbs of some doll. "I got shit," I whispered. "Godammit Dora, I just got shit." I saw that my wife's eyes were blood-shot and thought about Debbie behind the counter and Thelma's unborn baby.

Dora started sobbing. She hung her head and pressed her fingers into her eyes, drawing her eyebrows together. Then she straightened suddenly, glared at me with thin eyes, and sucked in a deep breath. She had the serious look of a woman about to make an important announcement. But

then she sat back down and hung her head dramatically. All that black hair of hers fell forward like a curtain and then all I could see was her long hair rippling like ocean waves while she sobbed.

Then Melissa, my daughter, she shuffled in the kitchen wearing yellow Spiderman pajamas with white rubber soles. She was five and going to kindergarten in Winosha Springs. Every morning Thelma dropped off her boy Danny on her way to punch in at Iverson's. Then my wife'd ride to work with Dora and around 7:30 I'd drop both kids off at their school. Melissa's from my first marriage when I was married to that Hannibal barmaid, Twyla Bartone.

Melissa walked right up to Dora and kissed her cheek. "I'm hungry," my daughter said, checking around for Dora's face beneath all her hair. "I'm hungry," she said again, stooping, peering into Dora's face as if she were a museum exhibit. Then Melissa looked up at me, and sat down with a huff. Dora looked up and her hair fell back. I saw dark tear streaks down her cheeks. On the stove, the bacon sizzled and popped.

"Why's Dora crying?" Melissa asked me.

"Because," I said. "Dora's crying because she wanted something I couldn't get. I tried but I couldn't get it. Dora's angry about it."

Dora looked up suddenly. "You went to the bar," she said. "You drank. You didn't even do it. You didn't even try."

"Do what?" Melissa wanted to know.

Dora turned to Melissa and spoke with a measured calmness. "Your father's a coward. That's what I married."

"Watch your mouth, Dora," I said, and felt that tight feeling you get in your stomach when you know someone is saying bad things about you. Even though I didn't do nothing but fragment the Betty Crocker boxes, I was tempted to

snap the clip from the gun right then and drop it out in front of Dora's wet little face and say, "Here Dora, count the bullets. Count the bullets and see who's a coward. A coward don't blow off a whole clip in a public place." But I didn't say that. I just stared at my wife.

"I'm hungry," Melissa said. Her voice was loud and high.

"She's hungry, Jubal," Dora said. "Feed her."

I took a look around the kitchen. "Give her a pop tart," I said to Dora.

"You."

I took a look in the cabinets above the stove. I couldn't find any pop-tarts.

"I'm hungry!" Melissa said.

I looked at the bacon. "Here," I said. I grabbed the skillet. The bacon was black and hard and sizzling in a pool of dirty oil. I brought the pan over and set it on the table.

"You just can't feed her that," Dora said. "Jesus Christ, Jubal, don't you got sense enough to feed your daughter decent?" She looked at the fry pan. "Get it off the table! You're gonna burn the top! Put it in the sink!"

I moved toward the sink with the pan. The bacon was still popping. Just before I was about to set the fry pan down, a bead of hot oil hit my wrist and I dropped the pan on the floor. The metal hit the linoleum with a clang so loud it echoed like an explosion.

"Jesus Christ!" Dora cried out.

Melissa burst into tears.

My wrist burned in one small spot from the oil, and while I soaked it with some cold water, all I heard was Melissa crying and sucking in loud breaths. "You be quiet," Dora was saying to Melissa. My wife's voice was loud. "You calm down."

"You don't gotta yell at her," I said and wiped my wrist with a washcloth.

"Go to your room then," Dora said to Melissa.



I looked at my daughter and saw her face was a puffy red. Her eyes were wide open and filled with the kind of awful fear you see in kids Melissa's age.

Melissa ran out the kitchen and down the hall. Chair legs dragged across the floor and Dora stood up. "You didn't even do it. How come when I ask you like that you don't do it? You got too much liquor on that brain of yours to see what's important and what's not?"

I stood straight and looked at my wife. "You come here. You stand right here and smell my breath, Dora."

"I can't even trust you to help," Dora said. She moved close to me, close enough to smell my breath if she wanted to. "You don't even got the decency to help me when I ask for it. I'm helping out Thelma, Jubal. My own flesh and blood. Her bills are so high she barely got money to buy gas for her car. You understand?"

"You help," I said, slowly. "You rob convenience stores is how you help." I paused a minute, then realized something. "And you don't even do it, Dora. You get your husband to do it."

Dora moved toward me with an intense look on her face. I felt her breath against my lips. Stale breath, I thought. Dora has stale breath. "A man like you ain't got nothing but bricks in his head. You don't know what it's like when family needs you." She smiled a mean smile. "You ain't got family Jubal. No brothers, no sisters. What's a person like you know about flesh and blood?" Her smile disappeared, then she cocked her head. "Huh?"

She was half-right about my family. Both my parents were dead and I'd long ago lost track of any aunts and uncles I once had. "But I got Melissa," I said.

Dora snorted. "She might as well be my flesh and blood. You see her when you're sitting down watching the black and white — your goddam Magnavox — drinking Schlitz. You just give us shit now."

"Don't say those things, Dora," I whispered. "When I was working, I was paying my bills," I said. "Every day now I take my daughter to school. Every day—"

"And then what?"

"—and then what what?"

"Then you come back, you sit in here—"

"I look for a job is what. I scan the ads—"

"You 'scan the ads,' Jubal?"

"I told you, I'm bidding my time—"

"Scanning the ads? No. You watch soaps, the game shows—Let's Make A Deal the whole day—"

"Yeah?"

"—yeah, while I work. Monty Hall. I come home from Iver—"

"Monty Hall? The fuck you think—"

"—yeah, that's right, and then I come home, the Family Feud's blasting—"

"Hey." I poked her shoulder with my finger. "I got you the bathrobe, Dora." I poked her again, harder. "You're wearing the fucking bathrobe because of me. You call that shit?" I kicked the fry pan and sent it sliding across the linoleum toward the doorway.

Dora pressed her eyelids together, and flared her lips. She drew in a breath, long and slow. I could see her teeth. "You didn't get the one I wanted." she said. "I wanted the red one. The Klein's robe."

For a long time we were silent. Then Dora put her head down and started breathing short breaths. She began to sob. She just stood there sobbing and sobbing with her head down, standing right in front of me. I thought of Debbie behind the counter, the way she'd dropped to the floor and covered her head with her hands.

"Gimmee the gun," Dora said suddenly. "I'm getting the money myself." She reached behind my jacket and felt around my belt. "If jackass Jubal can't do it, then it's up to his wife."

Then I grabbed her bathrobe front and pushed her across the kitchen. I pushed her so that her foot lodged on a chair and she nearly tripped, but I kept pushing her all the way across the kitchen so her butt rested against the sink.

"I ain't dumb and I ain't a coward," I said to my wife's face. "You wanna know what happened?" I said, looking at my wife. Her eyes moved quickly back and forth as if she couldn't concentrate. "You wanna know really what happened, Dora?"

"Yeah, Jubal," Dora said. "You drank a six pack."

"Ok," I said. "Ok then I'll tell you."

"Yeah. You tell me."

"I killed her then."

"Who?"

"I went violent on her. The clerk. The pretty little 7-11 girl. " I reached around my belt then and took hold of the gun. Then I poked it into my wife's face. "I just pulled this trigger." I rested my finger on the trigger until I felt it give slightly. "I shot her. I pulled this trigger. Bang," I whispered suddenly. "Bang. Bang. Bang. Just like that in her head."

But my wife grinned down the barrel and said, "Yeah? Well, where's the cash then?"

I stared at her. "Don't that mean nothing?"

"Not if you come back with no cash it don't"

"I told you."

"Once again, Jubal—"

"You don't listen is your problem, Dora. You're deaf to what I got to say."

"—once again all you get is shit. I'll tell you—"

"Because all the register did was to beep is why!"

"—no, Jubal. Listen. I'll tell you. You—"

"Why then? Huh?"

"You went to Lucky Jim's. You didn't get ten miles of that 7-11. All you did was to—"

"That's a lie," I said. "I went in there and—"

"—to drink like you always do. You—"

“—no! You’re wrong!”

“You—”

I pressed the gun against her forehead. “Don’t say no more lies,” I whispered. “You’re lying now. You don’t know the real truth.” I could feel my hands shaking. I could feel my palms getting sweaty. But I kept myself calm. I even moved my finger off the trigger.

Unlike Dora, I knew my limits. I knew when to say when. When my first wife Twyla Bartone bolted West with the groom from the local harness track, she left behind a 8" black and white Magnovox. Dora didn’t care one bit for its unstable horizontal and insisted we get a name-brand color model. So last winter when I was employed with Gunther Construction on the Palmyra Blacktop, one of the first things me and Dora did together was to take a ride down to the Huck Finn Shopping Center in Hannibal and buy ourselves a brand new 19" Sylvania Superset and matching wood-grain stand with aqua-blue polyurethane castors.

Things went well with that 19" Sylvania until just a few months ago when Winosha Springs had its worst springtime flood since 1964. The Mississippi crested five and a half feet above flood stage and the Army Corps of Engineers put the word out for sandbaggers. But by that time, I’d been out of work with Gunther for about a month and half, so Dora made sure I got myself signed on the crew. For five days running, fourteen hours a day, me and eleven others bagged the bottomland levees down around Canton.

On the last night of the rain, a Tuesday, me and Dora were watching Baretta when Thelma called to say she and Danny were high and dry but trapped in their house on stilts. They couldn’t go nowhere because the water was up to the deck door. I told both her and Dora that there was no way my ’77 Buick Riviera would make it through the flood-waters on the Frontage Road. I said that what was needed was a good Evinrude jonboat, and that was something I didn’t have. I learned later that it was that neighbor of hers,

Bobby Timpani, who boated them to safety. Apparently, Thelma waited out the highwater until she spotted Bobby trolling for large-mouth Bass not far from her bathroom window.

Anyway, I was about to hand the phone over to Dora that Tuesday night when out our living room window I saw an indeterminate number of lightning bolts slice across the night sky and light up the far horizon. Before I could count seconds to figure out the lightning's distance, thunder exploded above us with a crash so loud I felt my stomach shake and my eardrums throb. Our Schlitz bottles rattled off the coffee table, the phone line went dead, and that new 19" Sylvania Superset of ours winked off with a smoky pop.

Of course, our Wal-Mart warranty had long since expired, so between Thelma being flooded out, my unfortunate employment situation, and all those lightning bolts surging through our Sylvania's high-tech circuit boards, Dora was none too happy at the unfavorable turn of events. She slammed the phone down to the floor, pushed the Sylvania off its stand, and locked herself in our bedroom. I tried picking the bedroom lock, but Dora'd done it enough times to know how to gum it up good with stale Juicy Fruit.

Clearly, the Sylvania was a lost cause. By tipping it over, Dora in her desperation had cracked the picture tube, broken off the volume knob, and chipped the finish. So when the power flipped back on right before dawn that next morning, I got out Twyla's old 8" Magnavox, set it on the wood-grain stand, and laid awake on the davenport watching the early morning Ag reports.

Now Dora was just staring into my eyes, breathing slowly. "Get that," she began, then slapped the gun away from her forehead. "Get that goddam pistol outta my face, Jubal." Then she dropped her head and wouldn't look at me. The morning sun light was beginning to shine in from the East. Thin diagonal streaks shone through the window glass

and across the peach-colored linoleum. And just then I became aware of every sound in the kitchen: my wife's breathing, my own breathing, and the flourescent hum above us.

After a moment, a car pulled up on the driveway. I knew it was Thelma's El Camino because I heard the noisy throttle of her busted muffler. Two car doors slammed, I heard footsteps up the porch, and Danny cried out for Melissa. He yanked opened the screen door, and there he stood in the living room.

"Howdy," Danny said, and walked in the kitchen past me and Dora. He shuffled down the hallway and headed for Melissa's room. Thelma stood in the living room, watching me and Dora.

"You're a rotten liar, Jubal," Dora said. She walked into the living room, took Thelma by the arm, and led her out on the porch. They both sat down on the porch swing. I went in the living room, sat down on the Lazy-Boy and took a long, deep breath. It was nearly six-thirty now, and when I flipped on the Magnavox, all that was on was local news and Bullwinkle.

Dora and Thelma sat down beside each other on the porch swing, shoulders touching. Thelma had long, dark blonde hair that came down way past her shoulders. She always made a point to do her hair in the same manner that the big-name television stars were doing at the time, teasing it so that her loopy curls framed her face in a lazy, sexy way. Through the window above the television I watched Dora turn to face Thelma, then watched Thelma nod quickly, look toward Dora, nod again, then look forward. Thelma's hand wiped her cheek. She nodded. They swung together like that for some time, Dora watching Thelma, and Thelma nodding and nodding.

"Licky!" I heard Danny cry. "Licky, licky, licky!" Danny ran past me. He jumped up and down. Glasses shook

in the kitchen. Then Melissa came into the living room, crawling on all fours, panting hard, her tongue hanging from her mouth. She still wore her Spiderman pajamas, the rubber soles as black as charcoal. She wiggled her butt with each pant. She barked.

"Missy's a dog," Danny tried to explain to me. "She's trying to lick me." He giggled loudly. Melissa lunged at his leg with her tongue. Danny screamed. "Licky!" Danny cried out. Melissa barked again.

The screen door crashed open and Thelma was there. "Get up," she yelled and yanked Danny backward. "Quiet," she said. Thelma wore a baggy gray sweatshirt, blue jeans, and dirty white tennis shoes. Her sweatshirt sleeves were pushed up to her red elbows.

"You too," Thelma said. She walked toward Melissa, grabbed her hand, and yanked her to her feet. Thelma had her arms raised high, holding both kids by their hands. She looked as if she might be holding two dead chickens.

"The hell?" I said, and stood up. I knew Thelma was my wife's sister, but that gave her no reason to grab my daughter like that.

Dora came in and stood beside her sister. "We're leaving," Dora said.

"We're going into town," Thelma said. Danny started crying. She slowly lowered both kids.

"Don't you gotta go to work, Dora?" I asked.

"Me and Thelma still got days coming." Then she darted for the hallway.

Now it was me and Thelma standing face to face and I didn't know what to say.

"Dora told me what happened," Thelma said.

"Yeah well," I said. "Dora don't got her story straight."

"You have to understand," Thelma said. She moved closer to me. "You gotta understand, Jubal. I'm running out of time. It's dangerous now. The doctor tells me it's getting

late. He told me, he said, if I wait longer I gotta go to the hospital. I can't go to no hospital, Jubal." Thelma's eyes were beginning to tear up. From the television, I heard the weatherman say thunder showers were heading in from the West.

Dora came back into the room wearing a flannel shirt, blue jeans, and holding her shoes. Her bare feet were long and skinny and the toenails were covered with chipped red nail polish. Dora painted her toenails for her birthday. I remembered that. She painted her toenails red because she wanted it to match her new bathrobe.

"Let's go," Dora said, and grabbed Melissa's hand.

"Where you going?" I said, still standing face to face with Thelma.

"In town," Dora said. "Come on, Thelma."

"I'm sorry, Jubal," Thelma said.

"When'll you be back?"

We're going to get all this over with," Dora said. "I'm gonna do it right."

"We can't," Thelma sobbed.

"Come on, Thelma," Dora said. "It'll be all right. Gimme the gun, Jubal."

"You gonna kill someone with it?"

"I'm gonna help my sister."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you do what you want," I said, reached behind me, and set the gun on the Magnavox. "You go on and get the money, Dora," I said. "Thelma," I said, and looked Thelma square in the eyes. "You make sure your sister gets that money. Make sure she gets it all and gets it good."

"I'm sorry, Jubal," Thelma whispered.

Dora picked up the gun and snapped out the clip. "What you do with the bullets?"

"I told you what I done," I said.

"Jubal tells me he killed the woman," Dora said to Thelma. "He popped her but still didn't get the money. You



believe him, Thelma?" Dora clicked the clip back in the pistol grip. "Said he popped her in the head. Was that it, Jubal? In the forehead?"

I shrugged. "She held out. I had to turn violent."

Thelma looked at me. "You shot her, Jubal? Dora said you went—"

"He didn't do no such thing," Dora said. She pulled back the barrel and looked in the chamber. Then she levelled the gun at Twyla's 8" Magnavox. "Still got a round in the chamber, Killer." And then she pulled the trigger. The picture tube imploded. Sulfur sparks showered out the back and up the flowered wallpaper. The television tumbled face down on the rug, sizzling.

"Jesus," I whispered, and saw that the deep pile shag had begun to smolder. Dora tossed the gun beside the television set and took Melissa by the hand. They headed out the door and down the porch. Thelma and Danny followed close behind. The screendoor slammed shut.

"The hell you going with my daughter?" I yelled out. But I smelled the burning carpet. I ran in the kitchen to get a pan full of water. Out the window above the sink, I watched them all pile in my Buick.

"Where you taking my Melissa?" I cried, then ran into the living room and dumped the water on the carpet. The fire hissed out. Smoke trailed up from the burnt spot. I heard four car doors slam shut. The Buick started. Gravel rumbled.

Right as I got on the porch, I watched my Buick disappear down the driveway, moving toward Highway 24. I took a look all around and saw only Thelma's El Camino. I went in the garage, got my Slim Jim, and popped the driver-side door lock. Inside her El Camino, I touched the distributor and transmission wires together. I revved the engine a few times. Thelma's Vanillaroma air-freshner shook and dangled violently from the rearview. Black smoke poured out the exhaust. I knew this car needed a clean quart of Quaker State 40-weight. But my wife was right when she

said the times were desperate. So I backed out the driveway and took off down Highway 24 toward town.

Just past mile marker 366, the car sputtered twice and began jolting forward. When I checked the fuel guage, I knew the news was bad. I cursed Thelma. The car sputtered again, then died. I coasted to the gravel shoulder. I sat there with the window rolled down and stared at the greenery all around. I thought about Melissa in her Spiderman pajamas. I hoped Dora would have her back in time for supper.

After a moment, I got out of the car and started walking toward Winosha Springs. What else to do, I didn't know. I decided that while I was in town I'd stop by the Job Service and fill out that guard application. I knew things would deteriorate if I didn't make a further effort at employment.

Then I heard the sound of an engine in the distance. I stopped walking and turned around to watch the car come up over the top of the hill. The car, a turquoise Impala, pulled up onto the gravel shoulder where I was standing, and through the windows I could see two boys sitting there, the both of them vigorously chewing their Hubba Bubba.

The driver rolled down his window. "You looking to go into town?" His hair was dark red and I could see he was wearing silver and white braces on his teeth. The passenger bowed down his head and shook it from side to side, as if the situation was a funny one.

"I'm looking for some gas," I told them. "I ran out."

"That your El Camino back there?"

"Dead as she stands."

"We ain't got gas." The driver looked at the passenger. "Do we got any gas, Earl?" The passenger, Earl, shook his head no. The driver nodded in the direction of town.

"You wanna lift then?"

"You mind? A lift'd be fine."

The driver looked in Earl's direction and asked, "You mind if we give this man a lift, Earl?"

Earl kept his head hung low, shaking it slightly, moving it from side to side. The driver blew a wet pink bubble and popped it. Then Earl looked up suddenly and grinned.

The driver looked my way and finally said, "Okay, mister."

I moved then to grab the door handle to the backseat, but just as I did, I heard them both burst out into laughter. The engine roared and I felt the shotgun sting of gravel against my thighs and my chest, and when I closed my eyes and covered my face, I heard one of the boys yell something that I could not make out. Then I opened my eyes and was about to yell something back, but all I saw was that turquoise Impala of theirs fishtailing down the highway toward Winosha Springs.

-Chris Schweda