

Honorable Mention: "Twenty-Three" by Richard Townsley



Her body is in the trunk. It was what lawyers would call a "crime of passion": no premeditation, no malice, just rage. It's the same old story: boy meets girl, boy likes girl, girl likes boy, they get married, and he kills her with a dictionary. Her doing-in came via blunt force trauma—internal bleeding caused by *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged*. There was little blood. She hardly even struggled! Real shame. She was pretty. And all over a dispute about leftovers.

Harry Lime, the perpetrator of this most heinous crime, feels something resembling regret, although he would be lying if he were to say it was not exhilarating. Every man fantasizes about murder at some point; only a select few follow through. Harry is one of those rare specimens. His plan is straightforward: dump the body in the lake and pray nobody asks him about his wife.

The lake is sixteen miles away. On a vacant night—like tonight—the drive is twenty-three minutes. Not terrible. He carefully places the body in the trunk, starts driving. Most men, when faced with such an exciting adventure, start acting irrationally. Harry, however, is not like most men. His job as a gas station attendant has taught him the virtues of patience and the names of 73 flavors of cigarette. All he must do is drive under the speed limit and avoid any unwanted attention.

The ride is quiet and dark. The only sounds are the humming of the engine, broken by the occasional rattling in the trunk. The only sights are that of the windshield devouring the asphalt and cars intermittently flashing their high beams into the driver's seat. The thirteenth minute passes; the silence is shattered by sirens. Slow to a stop. Watch in the rearview mirror as the state trooper exits his car and walks around the back. He stops to examine, places his

hand flat on the trunk. He stays there looking down; roughly fifteen seconds pass before he walks up to the window.

HARRY

"Officer, I was only going 35."

TROOPER

"This isn't about your speed."

HARRY

"..."

TROOPER

"License and registration."

Harry complies with his instructions. The cop walks him around the back, points at the problem. The taillight is broken—probably happened when he was throwing his beloved wife in the trunk. The state trooper orders it fixed immediately; he tells him—somewhat passive-aggressively—about a gas station just a mile away. They both get in their cars, start driving. The trooper follows. The next two minutes last forever. Harry turns on the radio station; it's jammed up with talk shows. Talk, talk, talk. The policeman's lights cut through the darkness and blind Harry in his rearview mirror. His message is clear. Harry complies, again. He pulls into the station.

The mechanic on duty looks at the car, makes a remark about how beautiful it is. He stares at the broken taillight, says it'll set Harry back about \$80. Stupid woman. Still draining his bank account even after death. The trooper has come to watch, sits down in the corner. Harry stands. The mechanic is somewhat disturbed by the audience. He looks at the taillight again before getting his toolbox out. He puts it on the trunk.

MECHANIC

"Open it."

HARRY

(not-so-calmly)

"Doesn't open."

The mechanic walks out, comes back with a crowbar. He is going to pry off the light. Harry

watches, eyes wide. The state trooper pops open a soda. The mechanic carefully places the crowbar in a groove under the light, pushes it down. The light pops off; the trunk pops open.