

Road Kill

by Mark Souza

Just outside Winslow, Arizona, Harlan Thomas absently stared at the pink glow on the horizon separating day from night while the gas pump ticked off the dollars. The shadowy emptiness of the desert resonated within a hollow spot inside his chest. He'd put a lot of miles behind him and still had a long way to go.

"That's quite a dent."

Startled, Harlan spun and spotted a man in shorts and a tee shirt crouched next to his car. He was thin and athletic looking, in his mid-thirties, skin well bronzed by the sun.

"Make a little noise next time. You nearly scared the life out of me."

The man flashed a friendly smile. "Sorry." He stood and extended his hand. "I'm Ted."

"Harlan," he said as he shook it.

Harlan's father once said you could tell a lot from a man's hands if you took the time to look. Ted's grip was firm, palm soft, knuckles free of scars. A *cubicle jockey*, Harlan guessed. He wore a wedding band, and a plastic chronograph.

"Every dent has a story," Ted said, "Am I right?"

"I suppose."

"Where are you headed, Harlan?"

Ted appeared down on his luck. Harlan sized him up and weighed the risks, knowing already what Ted wanted. The wedding band and easy smile tipped the balance. "I'm going to L.A. Need a ride?"

"Thanks, I'd be much obliged."

"Maybe you can help me stay awake."

Ted snickered as he climbed in, "I guarantee it."

Traffic was sparse on Highway 40. Within a few miles, the lights of civilization slid behind them like the present becoming the past.

"What's in L.A.?" Ted asked.

"My wife and daughter, uh, ex-wife I guess. I'll never get used to that."

"Divorced, huh? How long?"

Harlan squinted as he tried to recall. "Lizzy's thirteen now, so that makes it seven years."

"See her much?"

"Maybe once a month. Her mother keeps her pretty busy," he said. "How about you, any family?"

Ted looked out the passenger window and hesitated. "Let's talk about something else."

Harlan sensed fresh scars and acquiesced. "How do you make a living, Ted?"

"I'm a cop."

"Really?" Harlan stared at Ted in disbelief. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you don't look like a cop. I pegged you for a drifter."

Ted dug a wallet from his pocket and flipped it open to reveal a gold shield. "So what's your story, Harlan?"

"You mean what do I do for a living?"

The laugh lines bracketing Ted's eyes deepened. "No, what happened to your fender? Every dent has a story, remember?"

"Oh that." Harlan chuckled, "My wife ran into a light stanchion at the mall."

Ted cocked his head, "You remarried?"

"What?"

"Did you remarry after your divorce?"

Harlan laughed, "God no! Once bitten, twice shy."

Ted's grin straightened into a tight line. "Then you're lying to me."

A rush of warmth washed over Harlan's face.

"I have a built in lie detector, Harlan. It comes with the job. You said your wife wrecked your car, but you've been divorced seven years. This car is only four years old. It's bad math. Am I right?" Ted didn't wait for an answer. "Try again and don't lie this time."

"Why the third degree?" Harlan asked.

The muscles of Ted's jaw rippled and his eyes narrowed. "A jogger was hit and killed along this stretch of road last month."

Harlan's face went slack. "And you're accusing me?"

"Harlan, I'm just looking for the truth."

Harlan tightened his grip on the wheel and gazed out at the darkness beyond his headlights. "I hit a deer."

"A deer?" Ted sounded unconvinced.

Harlan nodded.

"Did you nod off and drift onto the shoulder?"

"No, nothing like that. This doe just appeared in my headlights. I tried to swerve, but it was too late."

"Are you sure it was a deer?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It was dark. You were tired. Maybe you only thought it was a deer. Maybe you were wrong."

"It was a deer," Harlan insisted.

Ted leaned close studying Harlan's face. "Then why lie? People hit deer all the time. It's no big deal. But you're still covering something. Why?"

Harlan sighed. "It's not that simple. The damn thing didn't die right away. I wanted to get it off the road before it caused a wreck, but it was kicking and thrashing. I couldn't get near it. So I..." he looked over at Ted, "I beat it to death with a tire iron."

Ted looked disappointed. "Congratulations, my lie detector finally stopped chirping."

“Am I in trouble for animal cruelty or something?”

“I’m no game warden,” Ted said, “but I don’t think so.”

Harlan sat back and gazed out the windshield, feeling relieved and weary. Silence stretched out uncomfortably before Ted finally spoke again.

“This truck stop coming up has terrific cherry pie. Why don’t we pull in?”

Harlan thought Ted was behind him as he entered the diner. When he looked back, he spotted Ted wandering pump to pump meeting cars as they pulled off the highway. He watched Ted strike up a conversation with a trucker refueling his rig. Moments later, Ted climbed into the cab. As the truck drove past the window, Harlan saw the crumpled right fender. *Poor bastard*, he thought, commiserating with the driver as the truck disappeared toward Winslow. *Every dent has a story.*

While he waited for the waitress to tally his bill, he noticed a cork board behind the counter. In the middle, between notices of pickups for sale, lost dogs, and missing children was a headshot of Ted. The words printed above Ted’s face read:

\$20,000 REWARD FOR INFORMATION ON THE HIT AND RUN DEATH OF OFFICER TED SCHREYER.

The waitress followed his eyes. “Oh, that was so sad. He was killed last month jogging along the highway between Winslow and here. Nicest guy in the world, left to die beside the road like some animal.”