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## Nowhere Man

Carson Mastick

Your brother doesn't usually show up in your door, smelling all coppery, like blood. Even through booze, I knew that smell. I'd been struggling to study with a month left of my junior year. Did I expect the Sunday of Memorial Day weekend 1980 to be eventful? It hasn't been, any other year. But there my brother, Derek, leaned into my room, looking like he'd gotten into what our mom called the Main Monkey Business. It was not a sight I wanted to see.

Derek had borrowed my Chevelle earlier, a silver '70 SS 454 with two racing stripes and a hood scoop that opened up when you stomped on the gas. A thing of beauty from my dad. Why was I the one given the Chevelle? I wasn't asking. You asked about gifts at our house and they wound up being someone else's, and you might just wind up instead with a Visit from the Belt, for being too curious. Pass, thanks.

"Hey," Derek said, closing my bedroom door quietly, seriously slamming me with his new scent. I put my book down. He was bare-chested, his hooded sweatshirt around his waist.

"What's up?" I asked. I should have been pissed. The deal with borrowing my car included a No Hard Drinking clause, and his new fumes were definitely Ode to Blood and Booze, Hard Liquor Edition. Normally I would have gone after him, but something was not right.

“You okay?” I asked, instead of *Ass face, why were you drinking in my Chevelle?* “You look kind of, um, pale?” Not really, but he was sensitive about his looks. Among my brother and sister and me, he’d hit the jackpot in the Indian Genes roll of the dice.

Derek responded by making the absolute weirdest request of our lives as brothers. He’d pushed some of those limits in the past, but nothing came close to this wackiness.

“Would you, uh . . .” He twitched his mouth and turned. “Would you . . . look at my ass?”

“Depends,” I said, willing to play. “D’you shower today?” The joke stopped sharp when he finished turning, like broken glass in my throat. The left cheek of his jeans was wet and dark maroon, almost black.

“Doused my shirt in JD and stuffed it inside.” He slid his jeans down, giving a blast of whiskey vapors. The exploding airship on his Led Zep shirt was soaked, streaked pink.

“What the hell did you do?”

“Questions later? How bad is it?”

“Bad enough.” I lifted the upstairs phone extension, pretty rare on the Rez—another Dad Mystery Gift—and called my friend Hubie Doobie. The chances someone from my Rez might become a doctor were slim to begin and Zero for someone like Doobie—he’d flunked kindergarten, after all—but he had those bright-boy dreams, and I knew he’d offer useful information and more important, he wouldn’t ask questions. I told him that I’d nicked a butt cheek with yard clippers and asked him what to do. He didn’t even ask how.

“Take those jeans off and put these on,” I said, handing Derek a pair of briefs.

“They’re too tight,” he said, sliding out of his boots to get the jeans off. He knew that he could argue all he wanted but that I was right. That was partly why he came to me. The other part was that our dad would have kicked his ass for how bad this looked, bleeding or not.

“That’s the idea,” I said. “I gotta run downstairs for hydrogen peroxide. It’s gonna hurt way more than those tight undershorts.”

I unspooled paper towels from the roll I kept under my bed and handed them to him, throwing more on my Guitar Chair. “The Quicker Picker-Upper,” I said, stealing a line from a commercial. “Stuff them around the cut and sit down. Cross your legs. Lean on that cheek. Someone stab you?”

“Questions later, you moron!” he blew through clenched teeth. That was bullshit. Clearly, Monkey Business had found Derek, probably somewhere beyond our border signs announcing TUSCARORA INDIAN RESERVATION, and probably? He’d gone looking for it. With my keys. Of course I had questions.

I fast-casual cruised downstairs to the bathroom. Our sister, Sheila, was yacking with our parents in the living room. I was appreciative of her distraction as I snuck by, grabbing peroxide, first-aid tape, and big gauze pads we kept since my dad went on blood thinners.

“Lay there,” I said to Derek when I got back, tossing my pillow to the floor. “Bury your face in that. This shit’s gonna hurt.”

“The floor!” Even excessively bleeding, my brother was trying to call the shots.

“I don’t want you staining my bed.”

“’Cause *you* don’t do that on your own?” Unbelievable, a wiseass even in this condition!

“If you’re trying to hide this, whatever *this* is, from Dad, I don’t want to need my own lies about why there’s blood all over *my* mattress. It’s not like that happens a lot.” He dropped down clumsily to the floor, and I soaked the gauze pad in peroxide. I started wiping from the outside in, trying to find the wound’s borders.

“Uuuuhhhck!” Derek yelled into my pillow when the peroxide hit. Cleaned up, the cut didn’t look too bad, a furrow. Not something I’d seek out, but the amount of blood suggested it could have been way worse. It was like a cannibal had run an ice cream scoop along Derek’s ass.

If he didn’t want it to scar, stitches would have been the way to go, but if he didn’t mind a huge new dimple, my first aid should work, according to Doobie. It looked like what they call a flesh wound on hospital shows—the injuries the non-white people came into the ER

with. No car accidents or falling down stairs, or wife beating. A flesh wound usually meant one thing.

“Slowing down,” I said. “Slide my pillow under your belly and push your hand against your butt cheek.”

“Feel like I’m in *Deliverance*,” Derek said, bleeding and still cracking jokes. “If you tell me to squeal like a pig, I will kick your ass, bullet wound or not.”

“Best way to slow bleeding is elevation and pressure. Better hope you’re a good clotter,” I said. A bullet wound. That was at least one significant detail confirmed.

“Gotta get rid of these,” he said.

“Way ahead of you,” I said, showing him the trash bag I snagged. “Say goodbye to Led Zep.” I stuffed everything in and tossed the bag out my back window.

“Here.” I handed him a stack of folded briefs. “Keep checking to make sure you’re not bleeding through. Get a tetanus shot when you stepped on that nail last summer?” He nodded.

“Where you going?” he asked when I stood up.

“Getting clothes from your room.” I helped him get them on when I got back. “You can make it to your room, but the more you move, the more it bleeds. Does the Chevelle need cleanup?”

“Sorry,” he said, hobbling to the door. “I tried. Amazing how much blood an ass has.”

“You mean *you* or your actual ass?” We both laughed, a little. I headed downstairs, as casual as you can with a bottle of Lysol spray in hand.

“Get over here,” my dad said, spinning his chair in the living room and grabbing me by the collar before I could even say anything. He’d kicked off his boots and draped his workshirt on the back of his chair. His T-shirt was grubby from work and damp with a couple condensation rings where he’d been resting a beer on his potbelly. “What the fuck are you doing?” he grumbled, yanking my shirt so hard I heard the seam separate a little. “You wanna clean? I got a whole toilet you can do right now. Top to bottom, bathtub included.” We were inches away, and I could feel his knuckles on my chest, press-

ing hard like I was trying to run away. I knew from years of experience that he could twist and ram without breaking a sweat. He was looking to see if my eyes were bloodshot or if I smelled like alcohol or weed, both fortunately a negatory.

“I was just gonna clean bugs off my windshield before they got crusty,” I said.

“You don’t use Lysol, numbnuts! You’ll screw up the windshield. I knew I shoulda given that car to one of the others.” Was I gonna mention the real reason I was cleaning up? No way. I’d been here before and it didn’t matter what I said, really. I was on his Orneriness Radar right now, and I didn’t want this to move into Go Get Me My Belt—You’re Not Too Old to Learn a Lesson from Your Old Man territory.

Now that I was being watched, I couldn’t leave without a legit reason, so I tossed the bloody bag into my trunk and settled for spraying the seats with the Windex my dad made me get. It was too dark to see, but at least they were black vinyl, and I was just relieved he hadn’t decided he needed to *supervise and incentivize*. I went straight to bed when I got back in.

When I woke up at 6:30 the next morning, I cracked Derek’s door to check on him, pulling the top sheet back over most of him. Tracks covered, I went downstairs, grabbing my keys.

“Want some coffee?” my mom asked, getting up to grab me a cup. My dad was already gone somewhere and she liked to yack away lazy in the morning, but I had to split. I had some new work, thanks to Derek, and I had other plans too.

“Nah, I promised Lewis him and Albert could ride to the cemetery with me.”

“A real promise or a Gas-Money promise?” she asked. “You know they don’t have it.”

“A real promise. Honest.”

“You just remember, you were given that car, and without my help, you might be sitting home most nights anyway.”

“I know,” I said, heading out before she could drag me back in.

In the morning light, I could see the Chevelle’s stitching on the driver’s seat was discolored. Probably, no one else would notice, but I wanted it gone. And even though I’d left the windows open last night, JD scent still lingered inside. I’d deal with that later.

I jumped in, and when I got near one of the field car paths cut through the Rez woods, I headed in deep, ditching Derek’s jeans, socks, T-shirt, and hooded sweatshirt at different places along the path. I then stuffed the trash bag under my spare, and headed to Lewis’s.

Every Memorial Day, Lewis Blake and his Uncle Albert made wooden crosses for family members who’d moved on, painted white with names Magic-Marked on the crosspieces. I’d grabbed tools of my own, to clean up around my own grandparents’ graves, but mostly, I was making a deposit in the Lewis Favor Bank that I could withdraw later.

“Hey, Gloomis, Albert,” I said, pulling in. Lewis handed me a Styrofoam cup of coffee.

“You ever going to stop calling me that?” Lewis asked, trying to situate the crosses in the trunk. “And what’s that weird smell?”

“Are you ever going to smile?”

“I smile, when I have reason to.”

I definitely did not have anything to add to that.

I’d hung out with Lewis Blake off and on my whole life, and he always insisted he had nothing to smile about. I wished he’d stand up for himself. Over the years, I’d tested him, seeing if he’d ever grow a pair of balls, but he was still camped out in eunuch territory. He was even the one who taught me the word “eunuch,” which I’m sure he regretted. Knowledge is Power.

Why did he put up with all the shit I gave him? The truth? He didn’t have a *ton* of friends. I mean, we were about to be seniors in high school, and his Uncle Albert *was* his best friend, and Albert was a little nuts. They even shared a sad bedroom in their ratty house.

It probably started when Lewis had banked all his money on winning the Brainiac Lottery in sixth grade, when we were forced to go to the Central Junior High since the Rez school only went up to fifth.

He was blown away with outrage when all those white smart kids in their Fancy Classes didn't want anything to do with him. And then another guy in particular decided to make his life hell. I still don't know how that one ever even noticed Lewis. The guy was mostly in the Underachiever Classes with me, but somehow he'd sniffed Lewis out.

Like the sucker that he was, Lewis kept trying and put the last of his charisma into making friends with a new kid, one of those guys from the air force housing. I could have told him what was going to happen, that George Haddonfield would up and leave one day, almost without warning. Still, I was pissed that he'd thought he could join the white world that easy. I let him learn his lesson, and when he was ready, I let him come back.

These days, it was in Lewis's best interest that I not fail. He was just another low-achieving Skin now finishing out his time, and he needed someone who'd at least let him sit at their lunchroom table. Plus, okay, yes, I was feeling a little more interested in helping him after Doobie ripped down a flyer from the music wing bulletin board last week. He had plunked this sheet of hot pink paper next to my tray of Fritos and mystery-meat sauce that they called Tacos, and he didn't say a word until I had read the whole thing.

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