

The Waiting Game

The car sat in darkness, camouflaged in the dimly lit street by its faded paint job and absent hubcaps. By squinting slightly, a passerby could undoubtedly discern a dark figure in the driver's seat, but thankfully for the driver the street was deserted. Suddenly the figure was illuminated by an eerie blue light shining from below the dashboard. It was the figure of a lean, grim-faced man. He raised the source of the light - a mobile phone - and shone it at his wrist, illuminating the face of a cheap, gold watch. The man's actions varied from scrutinising the wristwatch to glancing frantically at the large industrial warehouse across the street.

*

Joe tried desperately to calm his skittering nerves by counting the gentle ticks of his watch; allowing himself to be hypnotised by its constant, methodical rhythm; swallowed up in the steady beat. It was a special from Wal-Mart - a gift from his girlfriend, Claire - with a laggy second hand and specks of gold paint flaking off or worn away by friction. With barely concealed agitation, Joe tapped his fingers on the dashboard and continued to stare down at the watch. *Matt had promised*, he thought, *twenty minutes was all he needed; that was how long I would wait*. It had been five agonisingly slow minutes since Matt had left the confines of the shady car, and Joe was beginning to break out in a cold sweat; his anxiety taking hold.

He still vividly remembered his first encounter with Matt; the swagger in his step as he approached Joe at the family barbeque- claiming to be a distant friend of his cousin. Matt's breath was laced with alcohol as he whispered words dripping with temptation and deceit. Joe had foolishly been reeled into his web; seduced by the promise of security and comfort that he was just not certain he could supply on his own. At first he had been affronted by Matt's suggestion; indignant at the implication that Joe could not provide for his own family. However one glance over at Claire; at her bare finger - missing the ring she unquestionably deserved - and Joe's resolve wavered. It took just one jarring reference to the 'new addition' to have him completely at the mercy of Matt's scheme. From then on it had been many nights of careful planning and restless sleep.

It quickly became established that Joe would not be of much use once inside. He was too clumsy; too feeble and far too unlikely to shoot if anything went astray. He had experience with cars though, and had the common sense and foresight that Matt so obviously lacked. He was also the only person that was desperate enough to ever consider it. This was probably what had attracted Matt to him in the first place. Whenever Joe was uncertain - his conscience weighing down on him like a heavy, stifling sheet - Matt would forcefully reassure him with the same few phrases:

"No ties. No connections. Nothing to trace it back to us. Come on, I would say you've got nothing to lose but..." With those final words his lips would curl up in a distasteful smirk; revealing the tips of his yellowing teeth. Usually if that failed to steady Joe's resolve, he would slip in a snide remark about the price of diapers or how Claire was positively glowing last time he saw her. Joe hated Matt at these moments, and sullenly returned to his work.

Joe had met Claire five years ago. It was not a particularly romantic story; no eyes meeting across the room; no love at first sight. They had been introduced by friends at a party and their first date was at cheap, Indian restaurant. He didn't even remember what they talked about really. All he remembered was how her face would crinkle up when she laughed; almost obscuring the blue eyes which sat behind pale lashes. He remembered telling joke after joke, trying to make her eyes disappear completely in her milky white cheeks. He didn't remember exactly when he decided he loved her - just that it wasn't really a decision at all. Since then time had seemed to pass both slowly and quickly simultaneously. They had talked about the future, marriage and holidays they would take when they had the money. They rarely talked about a family. But after that first doctor's appointment Joe realised he had never wanted anything more. He could almost feel the

comforting weight of a child asleep on his shoulder; tiny hands clutching groggily at his neck. He could faintly hear the pitter patter of little feet across a linoleum floor, and could see a small, soft face scrunching up with laughter; a perfect little replica of Claire.

Bang! The sound of a gunshot pierced the still night and reverberated down the empty street; jolting Joe from his reverie. He jerked forward - his senses coming alive in the compartment of the small car. His breath was heavy, his skin prickled with sweat and his vision sharpened in the dim light. Fear gripped him with icy hands as he gravely reconsidered what he had gotten himself into. Darting his head around wildly he sat perched; searching for any sign of movement in the dark street - but there was nothing. He exhaled deeply and unclenched his palms, but Joe's mind reeled and raced with the implications of that single bullet. The fear passed. However it was replaced by a sickening sense of guilt and dawning realisation. It was then that the full wave of his regret cascaded upon him.

There were dozens of scenarios and consequences flowing through his mind - but a single image stood out amidst all the chaos - her face - crying without anyone to comfort her. Claire didn't deserve to be married to a criminal, he realized with sudden clarity. His child didn't deserve to have a criminal for a father. Or worse - if he was caught - grow up with the ghost of a father; a picture on the mantle and a rotting soul in jail. The money just wasn't worth it, he would find another way. Joe finally understood that all the riches in the world couldn't make up for lost time. He checked his watch - the peeling gold paint glinting under the moonlight. It was 17 minutes in, but he no longer cared. He was done waiting. He was done with this life.

As he started the car and drove down the empty, silent street, Joe pulled out his mobile phone. The eerie blue light illuminated the murky darkness of the car's interior once more. He deftly dialled a number he had memorized long, long ago and raised the phone to his ear. As he turned the corner and exited the shadowy street, he felt a burden leave his mind as he heard the receiver pick up and the familiar greeting of the answering machine.

"Nine-one-one please state your emergency," the monotone voice droned out.