

Willy Vlautin, Novelist. UP Bookstore, Monday November 28th, 7:30pm.



Born and raised in Reno, Nevada, Vlautin has published four novels of dark literary realism: *The Motel Life* (2006), *Northline* (2008), *Lean on Pete* (2010), and *The Free* (2014). His writing has earned comparisons to John Steinbeck, Raymond Carver, and William Kennedy. This year's Oregon Book Awards nominated *The Free*, *The Motel Life* was made into a 2013 film, and *Lean on Pete* won two Oregon Book Awards and is currently being filmed. Vlautin founded the band Richmond Fontaine in 1994. The band produced eleven studio albums, plus a handful of live recordings and EP's. In 2014 Vlautin formed a new band, The Delines. Vlautin's storytelling in both prose and song explores economic vulnerability, addiction, and relationships in the overlooked spaces of contemporary America. Vlautin currently resides in Scappoose, Oregon.
(The below 11-page story is reproduced here with author's approval for classroom use.)

“The Kill Switch” by Willy Vlautin

[Story taken from: *The Highway Kind: Tales of Fast Cars, Desperate Drivers, and Dark Roads*, ed. Patrick Millikin. Mulholland Books Little, Brown & Company, 2016]

The house had three stories and was on the historical register but the people who owned it, professors at a university and their two teenaged kids, seemed to be hoarders. Eddie Wilkens, a forty-two-year-old house painter, stood on a ladder above a small alcove deck on the second floor scraping paint when Houston called to him from below. Eddie waved, set his scraper on the deck's railing, and climbed down.

Houston, a fifty-three-year-old alcoholic was thin and small in stature, with greased back gray hair. “Man, I don't know about this place,” he said when Eddie got down to the ground. “The entire yard is covered in dog shit and it's all around the base of the house, too. I've never seen so much. And then when I was walking around near the garage I found a pair of men's underwear and a half eaten sandwich sitting on top of it.”

Eddie nodded, took a cigarette from his shirt pocket, and lit it. He spoke quietly. “Where I am on the second floor, in the alcove, there are McDonald's bags everywhere, and clothes sitting out, and stacks of moldy books. And on the railing there's what I think is a bloody tampon half wrapped in toilet paper.”

Houston laughed and pointed to Eddie's cigarette.

Eddie gave him one from his pack and a lighter. “When I went inside to get the third story windows open I saw a plate with a half-eaten steak and green beans sitting on the stairs. It was covered in mold and ants were all over it. And if they want to go upstairs they have to climb over it 'cause there's stacks of books and papers everywhere else.”

Smoke came from Houston's mouth and again he laughed.

Eddie leaned against the house. “I bid this job on a Friday night. I always bid bad on Fridays. I barely looked around. I didn't want it, I could feel something was off so I just doubled the price and forgot about it. And then, shit, they took it anyway.” He looked around and sighed. “Well, we'll take over the yard from here on out. We can't be stepping in dog shit, rotten sandwiches, and underwear for a month.”

Houston nodded and they went back to work. They filled four black plastic garbage bags full of trash and shit and then took lunch. When they came back they went up the ladders again and scraped. It was August and hot and the afternoon passed slowly. From the twenty-four foot Eddie lit a cigarette and looked out at the neighborhood. He could see his white van with “Wilkens Painting Company” written on the side and past it the tops of a dozen houses. He looked out further, across two streets, and made out a derelict-looking Pontiac Le Mans. It was red with a white top. He always liked those cars and decided when the day ended he'd walk over to and see it. He finished his cigarette and went back to work.

Houston was on the other side of the house on a sixteen-footer, scraping. He was scared of heights and would only go that high. He kept in the shade and worked steadily until he saw Eddie come into view.

“It's five-thirty,” Eddie yelled out. “Let's call it.”

Houston nodded and came down. They locked the four ladders to each other and left them next to the house. They swept the old caulk and paint chip from the tarps, folded them, and set their tools in the garage. They both had cigarettes in their mouths when they walked from the house. In front of the work van Eddie took a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and handed it to Houston.

Houston had been paid in increments for three years. Twenty dollars a day, four days a week, and eighty dollars on Fridays. Once a month they'd stop by the post office and Eddie would buy money orders for Houston's phone bill, electric bill, gas bill, and rent. He'd put them in envelopes and mail them off. Their next stop was to the bank where Houston put the rest of his money in a safety deposit box. A box he could get to only during business days, during office hours.

They had worked together for nine years with only two major lapses. The first when Houston's mother died and he traveled back to Wyoming to clean out her apartment. He told Eddie he would be gone a week and then went missing for five months. When he came back he was drinking a fifth a day and living in his car. The second time he just quit showing up. He didn't answer his phone and wouldn't answer his door. He fell into a three-month-long drunk and ended up losing his place, his car, and living on the street. When Eddie finally found him he was holed up near the river in an old camping tent. He let Houston live in his basement, got him back on his feet, and gave him startup money for an apartment.

Houston bummed another cigarette, got in his car, and left. Eddie finished his and walked down the two streets to the Le Mans. The car sat covered in dust and there was a large dent in the front right panel above the wheel well. The paint was faded and oxidized. A half dozen spider cracks appeared along both sides of the car where bad Bondo patches had been attempted. The rims were cheap, aftermarket, and two of the tires were flat. The top wasn't vinyl but metal painted white. It was also oxidized. He figured it to be a '68 or '69.

He took a small spiraled notepad from his back pocket and wrote, *"I'd be interested in buying this car. I have cash, Eddie Wilkens"* He left his number, put the note under the windshield wiper, and walked back to his van and drove home.

In the carport he found the kid, Russell, waiting on a lawn chair near the back door. The boy was eleven but looked much younger. He was small, had brown hair, and his ears were too big for his head and even at that age he was getting picked on at school. He wore jeans, a red t-shirt, and black tennis shoes. In the house next door, he lived with his grandmother, mother, and his older half-brother, Curtis.

"Where did you work today?" he asked timidly.

"We're on the new job now," said Eddie and opened the back door to his house. He yelled for Early, and an old black mutt got down from the couch and hobbled outside.

Russell went to the dog and began to pet it. "You're done with the lady who had the orange fish?"

"We finished that on Friday."

"Did she like the paint job?"

Eddie nodded. "She paid us and made us those cookies I gave you. Remember?"

The boy kept petting the dog. He nodded. "I remember now. So you don't have any brushes for me to clean?"

"Not today," said Eddie. "We're scraping all week."

"That's the worst part of the job, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Did you eat dinner before you got home?"

"No," Eddie said. "Your mom's not around?"

He shook his head.

"What about your grandma?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Let me look at you," said Eddie.

Russell smiled suddenly and stood up.

"Yep, I was right," he said. "You look hungry."

Russell laughed. "That's what Monica used to say."

Eddie nodded.

"Monica's not coming back?"

"I don't think so," said Eddie.

"Why?"

"It's a long story," Eddie said and bent down and put his hand on the dog. "I know she misses you though. She told me that the last time I talked to her. Anyway, you want something to eat?"

"I'm hungry if you're hungry," said the boy.

Eddie reached into his shirt pocket, took a cigarette from the pack, and lit it. "Get your bike and tell your grandma you're going to the store. I'll make a list. You go shopping and I'll cook. Deal?"

The boy nodded and went back through the gate. He came back five minutes later pushing a bike with two flat tires. He leaned it against the house, opened Eddie's back door, and walked up the steps into the kitchen. "I think Curtis let the air out of the tires... I can't find the pump," he said softly. His face was red and wet with tears.

Eddie took a drink of beer. "Why would he let the air out of your tires?"

"I don't know," Russell replied.

Eddie finished the grocery list, put out his cigarette, and stood up. "We'll use the compressor in the garage. And remember, you can always leave your bike here if you want to protect it." He handed the boy the list, forty dollars, and the old backpack he had Russell use to carry the groceries in. They went outside, Eddie unlocked the garage, turned on the compressor, and filled the bike tires.

A week scraping on ladders passed. When he could, Eddie looked over the two streets to the Le Mans. He wasn't sure why exactly, but he began to want it. Each day after work he looked to see his note still there and untouched. When there was a night rain in the middle of the week and his note became illegible he left another. But no one called. When Friday came and they'd finished for the day he went to the houses around the car. He knocked on doors and asked if anyone knew who owned it, but no one did.

He and Houston worked a half-day on Saturday and when done they spread out and knocked on doors further down the neighborhood and finally Houston met the person who owned the car. It was a man who lived on a busier street a block away. Houston told Eddie which house and left.

The man was in his early twenties and let Eddie inside. The house, in the front room, had dozens of drawings taped to the walls. They were pen and ink dot and all of them had women in bondage outfits and positions. The women were beautiful but always bound. They didn't look happy or upset by it, they were just there.

The man was skinny with short shaved dark hair. He looked anemic and pale as he stood stooped over.

"The guy I work with said you own the Le Mans."

The man nodded.

"You interested in selling it?"

"I might be," he said. "But I ain't broke enough to sell it right now."

"Does it run?"

"It did at one time but I don't know now. A friend of mine said it's not good to start a car with flat tires so I haven't tried in a while."

Eddie glanced around the room. "You drew these?"

The man nodded.

"That's a lot of work."

"Yeah," he replied.

Eddie looked at the man. "You have the title for the car?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Well I'd like to buy if you ever want to sell it."

"Let me think about it."

"You mind if we swap numbers?"

"Sure," the man said and Eddie began writing his number in a small notebook he kept in his back pocket.

They had primed the house and were finishing two days of filling and caulking when Eddie's phone rang and the man with the Le Mans told him his rent was due and he didn't have the money to cover it. He would sell the car to Eddie right then if he had the money.

"Well how much do you want for it?" Eddie asked while caulking a window.

"How about four hundred?" the man said.

"I gotta go to the bank. I'll be over in an hour," he said and hung up. He got down from the ladder and told Houston the news.

"Don't do it," warned Houston. "You don't even know if it has an engine, do you?"

"No," Eddie replied.

"Then you're nuts." Houston put his caulk gun in a water bucket and wiped his hands with a wet rag.

"It's just one of those things," Eddie said and lit a cigarette. "I'm at the point where I'd pay two grand even if the tranny was shot, the engine was gone, and it didn't have a title. I don't know why exactly but I just have to have it now."

Houston bummed a cigarette from Eddie. "Even if it does run you'll spend more than two grand fixing it up," he said.

"I know."

"Paint jobs are a lot of money."

"I know that too."

"Old cars are like bad women," said Houston. "They're fun at first but they break down a lot and take your money little by little. For me it's alright when it's little by little but then always, eventually, they hit you with the big bill. But by then you've already put so much time and money into them it's hard to quit. So you pay up and then it starts all over again."

"I know all that," Eddie said and laughed. "But it'll give me something to do at night."

Houston nodded. "The last car I gave a shit about ruined me. A 1965 Mercury Cougar."

"I like those," said Eddie.

"I did too, but I was downtown, on Broadway, going up the hill when she cut out on me. The car was so damn heavy I couldn't push it and I couldn't back up 'cause there was too much traffic. It was rush hour. And then the cops came." He threw the wet rag in the bucket of water and combed his hair back with a small black comb he kept in his back pocket. "They helped me alright. They saw I was drunk and took me to jail and impounded the car."

"What happened to the Cougar?"

“I didn’t give a fuck then and I don’t give a fuck now. It was dead to me after that day. The way I look at it any car that breaks down on me when I’m drunk or in a traffic jam is no longer my car. I give no second chances. I hoped they crushed the shit out of it and melted it into bed pans.” Houston stopped and took a long drag off the cigarette. “It was a great looking car though. I spent three grand on the paint job alone. White with silver sparkles. Man, it was something else.”

Eddie parked the work van in front of the Le Mans. Houston sat in the passenger seat and listened to the radio while Eddie walked to the owner’s house.

“I only have a couple minutes,” the man said when he answered. He was dressed in an Applebee’s work shirt.

“Here’s the four hundred,” Eddie said and gave it to him.

The man counted it and handed Eddie the signed over title and two keys. They shook hands and Eddie walked back to the van and got in.

“You get it?” asked Houston.

Eddie smiled and waved the title at him. He started the van and took a small air compressor he kept in a milk crate, plugged it into the cigarette lighter, and went out the back to the Le Mans. The driver’s side door opened and he looked inside. It smelled of dust and mold and the front seat was in worse shape than he thought, as was the floor carpet. But the backseat was decent as was the dash. He opened the trunk to find eight old car batteries sitting on a piece of cardboard.

“Why you think there’s so many in there?” asked Houston who was now watching from the sidewalk.

“I don’t know,” said Eddie and shut the trunk. He lit a cigarette and opened the hood.

“At least it has an engine,” said Houston.

Eddie looked it over. A tired looking 350 covered in dust and oil and rust.

“You going to try and start it?”

Eddie shook his head. “I have a tow rope. I was thinking you could tow me in the van to my place. After that I’ll take you back to your car and set you free.”

Houston nodded and Eddie shut the hood. All four tires were nearly bald but they held air and Eddie hooked the tow rope from the van to the front of the Le Mans. With blue painter’s tape he spelled out IN-TOW on the back windshield and Houston put the van in low and towed him out of the neighborhood. They went the four miles to Eddie’s house and parked on the street.

Russell was waiting on the lawn chair in Eddie’s backyard when he heard the van. He came out front and walked across the lawn to see Eddie get out of the Le Mans.

“Why are you in that car?” he asked.

“I just bought it,” said Eddie.

“You just bought a car?”

Eddie nodded. “You think you can steer? We need to get it into the carport.”

Russell nodded. “This is really your car?”

“It is,” he said. “Now get in and steer and we’ll push it up.”

The boy got in the driver’s seat and held onto the wheel while Eddie and Houston pushed it from the street into the carport.

“Does it go fast?” the boy asked when he got out.

Houston laughed.

“I don’t even know if it runs,” said Eddie.

“But you bought it anyway?”

“It looks cool, doesn’t it?”

“If you like dents and Bondo it looks cool,” Houston said.

“I like it,” the boy said.

Eddie looked at Houston. “See, I told you Russell had taste.”

Houston again laughed.

“Will you make it run?” Russell asked.

“Eventually,” Eddie said and that set off Houston laughing again.

The next evening Russell sat in the lawn chair next to the dog while Eddie worked. He took the eight batteries from the trunk and set them in a row at the back of the carport. He took the best looking one from them, put it on a charger, and took out the one from under the hood and put it on another charger. He checked the fluids. The oil was full but the transmission was empty. He wrote a note to get a transmission filter kit and fluid, a fuel filter, oil and an oil filter. The top radiator hose was bulging and covered with duct tape and would also need to be replaced.

“Do you think it’s going to be fast?” asked Russell.

“Probably not unless I put a new engine in it.”

“Are you going to put a new engine in it?”

“Nah, I don’t care about going fast. Even when I was your age I didn’t. I’ll get it running though.”

“Are you going to paint it?”

“Nope,” Eddie said. “I’m going to keep the dents. You might think I’m crazy but I like dents. I’ll get the front seat re-upholstered, new carpet set in, and I’ll put in a good stereo. It’ll be nice inside when I’m driving around but I don’t want to be one of those guys who has a melt-down if a bird shits on the hood.”

“I can wash it if you want,” the boy said.

Eddie laughed. “I like the way you think, but it probably hasn’t been washed in years. It’ll be a hard job.”

“I can get it clean,” the boy said.

“Well I’ll pay you twice what I do for the van ‘cause it’s going to take you a while. Maybe tomorrow you could come over and let Early out. I have to do a couple bids in the west hills after work so I won’t be home until later.”

“I can feed Early, too, if you want.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Eddie said. “If you want to wash the car, please do, but don’t feel like you have to. I’ll put the house key under the front seat of the Le Mans. But don’t tell your brother you have it and don’t let him in the house, okay?”

“I won’t,” the boy said. “I don’t tell him anything ever.”

The next evening Eddie parked the van in the carport. As he got out he noticed four of the batteries from the Le Mans were gone. Russell’s bike was still leaned against the garage and nothing else was taken. He set down a bag from the Auto Zone, opened the back door, and let the dog out. He took a beer from the fridge, unlocked the garage, and got to work. He changed the oil, replaced the top radiator hose and the fuel filter, and then took one of the charged batteries and set it back in the Le Mans. He put two gallons of new gas in the tank, primed the carburetor, and got in the driver’s seat. He put the key in the ignition and the engine caught on the third try and idled smoothly. He got back out, checked for leaks, but there were none. As he stood watching, his gate opened and Russell walked slowly towards him.

“I missed you starting it,” the boy said.

“It wasn’t much,” said Eddie. “I just put a little gas in it and bam. I got lucky. She’s an old engine but she sounds pretty good.”

“I think she sounds good, too,” he said and went to sit down in the lawn chair but it pained him to do so.

“You’re hurt?” asked Eddie.

Russell looked at him and tears welled in his eyes.

“Curtis?”

Russell nodded.

“Did you tell your grandmother and your mom?”

Russell nodded vaguely.

“Do you want me to talk to him?”

Russell shook his head.

“Where’s your mom?”

“She’s at work.”

“Where’s Curtis?”

“I don’t know.”

“You think you need a doctor?”

“No,” Russell said quietly.

Eddie paused for a time and took a cigarette from a pack on the hood of the car.

“You did a good job washing the car.”

“I couldn’t get the hood,” the boy said.

“Don’t worry about the hood. I’ll get it. I’m going to change the tranny filter and if that does the trick and the transmission works we’ll take her for a little spin. Maybe go get pizza.” He lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply, and blew the smoke out. “But you don’t like pizza, do you?”

“Pizza’s my favorite,” the boy said and smiled.

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” he said.

“I thought you didn’t like pizza.”

“You know pizza’s my favorite,” he said and laughed.

“But I got a question to ask you first, Russell. Do you know anything about the missing batteries?”

Tears welled suddenly in the boy’s eyes. He tried to speak but couldn’t.

“It’s alright,” said Eddie. “I’m not mad at you. It’s just that four of the batteries are missing.”

Russell began sobbing.

Eddie went to him and patted him gently on the shoulder. "We'll talk about it later. I'm gonna get this thing up on blocks, change out the tranny filter, and see if we can get this thing to move."

Russell brought him two beers and a new pack of cigarettes before Eddie finished. He then started the car, put it in reverse, and the car went in reverse. He put it in forward and it went forward.

"We're getting lucky," said Eddie. "The tranny's alright and the engine's alright. I'm going to do one more thing and then we'll take her for a spin."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm putting in a kill switch."

"What's that?" asked the boy.

Eddie showed him a small electrical switch. "I'll set it up so you'll just hit this switch and the car won't start. It's for safety. These old cars are easy as shit to steal. My brother had his van stolen once, I had a Dodge Dart stolen twice, and an old Ford pickup stolen, too. That one cost me. I had a lot tools in it. After that I started putting in kill switches."

"Then they can't steal it?"

"Not unless they tow it or figure out where the switch is," said Eddie. He spliced the coil wire and ran two wires from each side of it through a hole he'd drilled below the glove box. He laid on his back on the floor of the passenger side connecting the wires to the switch he had placed hidden below the glove box. Russell leaned over the backseat and watched until Eddie finished.

"I think we're done now," he said and sat up. He started the car and then hit the kill switch and the engine stopped. He looked at Russell and smiled. "Now call your mom and tell her we're going to get pizza, okay?"

Russell crawled out over the front seat and walked back to his house. He came back two minutes later while Eddie was cleaning up in the kitchen sink.

"I can go," he said.

"You called her?"

Russell nodded.

"You ever waxed a car?"

Russell shook his head.

"Waxing a car is one of my least favorite things to do. My dad used to make me wax his car, and if I didn't do it right he'd be an asshole about it for a week. So I won't wax my own car. I just won't. But if I call your mom and she says she didn't talk to you I'm going to make you wax the Le Mans, alright?"

Russell looked at the ground but didn't say anything.

"Alright?"

The boy nodded slowly.

Eddie called Russell's mother, spoke to her for a minute, and hung up.

"You shouldn't lie," said Eddie and lit a cigarette. "Lying is a bad habit and no one likes liars. Your mom says you never called. Is she lying or are you?"

"But she doesn't care," the boy cried. "She said she doesn't care what I do as long as I'm home when she gets home."

Eddie looked at Russell. "That might be the case, but that's not the problem. The problem is that you lied to me. We're friends and you lied to me. I know you know about the batteries, too. And you wouldn't even tell me about that. It doesn't look good. It looks like you're a bad kid. Now I know you're not bad but you gotta start acting like a man once in a while and not like a little dude."

Russell began crying.

Eddie took a drink of beer. "I'm going to ask you one question, Russell. Did you call your mom?"

"No," he whispered.

Eddie smiled. "See it ain't so bad telling the truth."

The boy looked at him with tears streaming down his face. "Do you want me to leave now?"

"Nah," Eddie said. "You got to lighten up. We have work to do. We have to give this thing a test drive and then we gotta eat pizza."

Russell wiped his face and said, "I told you she doesn't care."

"That's not the point," Eddie said and laughed. "Jesus, you can be one hard headed son of a bitch sometimes."

The Le Mans front end was the problem. It was loose and drifts. The car needed new tie-rods, an alignment, tires and rims, and he'd have to give it a brake job. But it ran and the transmission seemed to be switching gears when it was supposed to. They drove around the industrial side of town for nearly an hour. They passed the horse track and drove along the river. They had the windows down and Russell hung his arm out the side. Eddie took them to a pizza parlor, they ate dinner, and afterwards Russell played video games while Eddie drank beer and worked on bids in the corner of the half-empty restaurant.

The next morning Eddie found a can of car wax in the garage and set it on the hood of the Le Mans next to a handful of rags and a note that read, "Read the instructions on the can before you do anything. The money is for lunch. I'll pay you for the waxing after you do it." Underneath the can he set ten dollars.

He went back to the garage and found a quart of old blue oil paint on a shelf. He opened it, stirred it for a long time, and then painted each of the four remaining battery handles. He drove to the job site and parked. The body of the house was finished and now the best part of the job was beginning. They were painting trim. The customers wanted three different colors and it meant two extra days of work. He took his best exterior brushes from his toolbox, his job-site radio, and headed up the drive. He unlocked the ladders and set them up.

He waited an hour before he began calling Houston from the top of the ladder, but Houston didn't answer. At lunch he drove to Houston's apartment to find him in his underwear. The TV was playing behind him. Inside the apartment was dark with the curtains drawn and Houston was pale and sick and coughed as he stood in the doorway.

"Jesus," Eddie said smiling. "What happened to you?"

"I'm not sure," said Houston quietly.

"Where did you get the money?"

"A guy I used to know invited me to his house. He was having a party and there was a bottle of Makers. I took it and sat out on his porch and that's all I remember."

"You drank the whole thing?"

"I don't know."

"It was nice of you to call and tell me you weren't coming in."

Houston ran his hands through his hair. "I set my alarm but I guess I didn't hear it."

"I don't hear it now," Eddie said.

"I must have shut it off somehow."

"Does the TV turn on by itself?"

Houston sighed. "Goddamn it, Eddie."

"Don't get mad at me."

"I couldn't get out of bed, alright. I've been shitting my guts out all morning and I'm sick."

Eddie laughed. "All you fucking guys lie. All you have to do is call and say, 'I got loaded last night and I'm a scumbag pussy and can't get out of bed on a hangover.'"

Houston shook his head and leaned against the door jamb.

"Get your work clothes on," said Eddie. "We're going to eat lunch and then you're going to work."

"I don't know if I can."

"I don't give a shit if you puke all over their lawn, they sure as fuck won't notice. Get dressed."

Houston nodded and began looking for his clothes.

Eddie drove them to a Greek diner and they sat in the back, in the bar, and he ordered Houston a beer.

"Drink it," said Eddie, "and then eat lunch. We'll buy you a six pack on the way to the job-site. I don't want any shaky lines today."

"I don't know if I can eat," Houston whined.

"Try a grilled cheese and some soup you sorry sack of shit," Eddie said. "And if you complain one more time I'll make you buy."

Houston nodded, the beer came and he drank it. He ordered another. They ate lunch, stopped at a mini-mart for a six pack, and then went back to work. Houston threw up twice but kept at it and the beer finally settled him and he got through the day.

That evening Eddie parked the van in the carport. He took out a bucket holding the dirty brushes in water. He passed the Le Mans and when he did he saw that the rest of the old batteries were gone. He walked to the back door, let the dog out, grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, and sat on a lawn chair and smoked a cigarette. The old dog wandered around the yard and then came back to him and sat by his feet.

Russell came through the gate minutes later. He walked hunched over and Eddie realized just how small the boy was, how thin his legs and arms were. As he came closer he looked at the boy's hands and could see blue paint on them.

Russell stopped ten feet away. "I waxed the car," he said.

"You did a good job," Eddie replied. "It's hard isn't it?"

"It wasn't that hard, but I couldn't get the hood."

"I'll get the hood," said Eddie.

"Do you need the brushes done?" the boy asked.

"There's five in the bucket. The big one, the three inch, is pretty trashed so don't worry about it too much."

The boy moved towards the bucket.

“But why don’t you come over here and say hey to Early before you get to work?”

But Russell wouldn’t come closer to Eddie or the dog.

Eddie looked at him. “Can I ask you a question?”

The boy nodded.

“Why do you have blue paint on your hands?”

Tears fell down the boy’s face.

“You can’t always cry, man... Get me a beer and yourself a Coke then come over here and sit.”

Russell nodded and went into the house. He came out with two cans and sat across from Eddie.

“I bet you tried like a mother to wash that paint off your hands.”

Russell nodded.

“But it wouldn’t come off?”

“No.”

“That’s ‘cause it’s oil paint. I’ll get you some thinner. You have to use thinner with oil.”

“I didn’t mean to steal them, Eddie. I didn’t. Curtis made me.”

“Why?”

“He takes them somewhere and they give him money for them.”

“Is Curtis home?”

Russell shook his head. “I told him you were my friend and that he shouldn’t take them. But... but then he made me take them.” Tears again filled his eyes. “You have to believe me, Eddie. I didn’t want to take them but he made me.” The boy pulled up his shirt and his small chest was black and blue.

Eddie took a drink off the beer and lit a cigarette. His face didn’t change. He said quietly, “Follow me to the garage and we’ll get the paint off your hands and then you’re going to wash my brushes. After that we’ll get something to eat. Are you hungry?”

“I am if you are,” the boy said.

“Good. You get the brushes done and we’ll get a quick bite to eat. I have some errands to do tonight so we’ll just get tacos.”

“From Alberto’s Truck?”

“Sure, we’ll go there if you want.”

“I want to go there if you want to go there.”

Eddie laughed.

“I was worried you’d never like me again,” Russell whispered.

“It’s your brother who’s in trouble,” Eddie said and put out his cigarette. “Not you. How old is he again?”

“Fifteen.”

Eddie nodded, got up, and waved to Russell to follow him. The blue paint came off the boy’s hands with a rag full of thinner and then he sent him to the basement with the bucket of dirty brushes to clean. When he could see the light in the basement go on he went next door to Russell’s home. The side door was open and he called out and the old woman, Russell’s grandmother, yelled from a back room for him to come inside.

It was a home she had lived in for thirty-five years. Her husband, Des, worked as a truck driver and had kept his shop, lawn, and house clean and well kept. Eddie and Des had got along well until two years back when Des had a heart attack and passed on. The old woman fell apart after that and her only daughter, Connie, moved in with Russell and Curtis.

The kitchen was nothing but dirty dishes, pans, and garbage. In the living room clothes were thrown about everywhere and the TV was on. An X-Box sat on a small coffee table next to a handful of soda cans, candy bar wrappers, and fast food bags.

The old woman sat in her room in a recliner reading a book with the help of a magnifier. She was frail for seventy years old. She had long gray hair that came down to her chest. She wore a bathrobe and slippers. The room was stale and hot and smelled of urine. Both the windows in the room were closed. There was a hot plate with a teapot on it and a stack of Cup of Soups on her dresser.

“How you been?” he asked.

“Hello, Eddie,” she said.

“What are you reading?”

“A murder mystery.”

“Are you still watching Days of our Lives?”

The old woman shook her head.

“No Bo and Hope?”

“I don’t like going outside my room.”

“Because of Curtis?”

“Curtis and Connie.”

“Curtis’s not around?”

She shook her head.

“You eating enough?”

“I don’t have much of an appetite anymore.”

“It’s hot in here. Do you want your windows open?”

She nodded.

Eddie went to them. They were both old weighted windows. It took him awhile but he got them open and fresh air came into the room.

Houston was in his underwear when Eddie beat on his door two hours later. He was drinking off a forty-ounce bottle of Old English and came to the door carrying it.

“I thought you said nine?”

“It’s eight-forty-five,” Eddie said. “I don’t see how you can drink that shit.”

“I like malt liquor.”

“Get dressed and let’s go.”

“And you say you’re buying?”

Eddie nodded and lit a cigarette. He went to Houston’s fridge, took a can of Coors from it, opened it, and sat down on the couch and waited for him to dress.

They drove to a strip bar called The Little Fox where inside a half dozen men watched a woman dancing naked. Behind them were five men playing video poker machines and two more sitting at the bar. The bartender was a sixty-year-old black woman and Eddie bought two beers from her, got ten single dollar bills, and handed the money and a beer to Houston. Houston went to the front and sat while Eddie stood in the back. He watched the woman’s last two songs from the bar, ordered another beer, and then Connie came to the stage.

She was a forty-year-old alcoholic with dyed red hair and large sagging breasts. Even from where he stood he could see her body was beginning to go. She danced three songs and towards the end of the third Eddie went to the front and sat. He placed a five-dollar bill down and when the song finished and she went to take it, he said, “You got a minute to talk?”

She nodded and told him she’d come out and find him.

Another woman came on stage and Eddie grabbed Houston and they sat at a small table in the back of the bar.

“Just remember what she says,” Eddie said. “She’s enough trouble that I don’t want to have a conversation with her when I’m alone.”

Houston had his eyes on the woman dancing. “You’ll buy another round won’t you?”

“I’ll buy you a six pack on the way home. We’re gonna get out of here the second she and I quit talking.”

Houston rubbed his hands together and smiled. “But I’ll need another beer if I’m gonna just sit here and listen.”

Eddie took five dollars from his wallet and handed it him. Houston got another beer and then Connie came out in an Asian robe and black high-heeled shoes.

“What’s going on?” she asked and sat at the table.

Eddie told her about the batteries, about Russell’s stomach and the beatings that Curtis had been giving him.

“I can’t control him,” she said hopelessly. “How do you think I feel? No one ever asks how I feel living with him. His father won’t do a goddamn thing and hasn’t paid child support since he was three.”

Eddie lit a cigarette. “I know you got a tough deal. I just want to let you know if he steals any more of my stuff I’m gonna call the cops on him.”

“You shouldn’t be leaving your stuff out there anyway” she said and looked out to the stage. “What about Russell?”

“What about him?”

“He’s getting the shit beat out of him by his brother.”

“Who didn’t get the shit beat out them as a kid? And why you spend so much time with him anyway? What’s in it for you?”

Eddie finished his beer and stood. “I’ll tell you this, if Curtis steals anything more from me I’ll call the cops and I’ll press charges. And you let him know if he beats up Russell anymore I’ll go to child services and I’ll fuck up both your lives.”

Eddie walked across the road and disappeared into a mini-mart and then came back carrying a six pack of beer. He got in the driver’s seat and handed the beer to Houston. “I gotta say I didn’t think she’d start crying. I thought she’d jump down my throat when I said the child services bit.”

“She ain’t as tough as she thinks she is,” said Houston.

“Was she on something?”

“Heroin I bet.”

“You think so?” Eddie asked.

“My ex-wife couldn’t quit that shit,” Houston said. “I can tell pretty easy.”

Eddie sighed.

Houston opened one of the cans of beer. "You know I even ironed this shirt. I thought I might have a shot with her. I could move in next door. I'd kick out Curtis. And then Russell and the old lady would move in with you, and suddenly I'd about have my own place. I'd be set."

Eddie laughed and started the van.

The house on the historical register was done and he and Houston packed up the ladders and did the last walk through and Eddie received the final check. They drove to the next house, a west hills home, a money house, and unloaded their gear and left it on the side of the garage. Eddie deposited the check, gave Houston his eighty-dollar weekend allotment, dropped him back at his car, and drove home.

When he got there the Le Mans was gone.

He let Early out and opened a beer. He smoked a cigarette, finished the can, and called the police. When he hung up he walked next door to find the side door again open. He called inside and the old woman again yelled from her room. She was sitting in the same chair reading a book in a house coat. She hadn't seen Russell or Curtis.

The police came an hour later and Eddie filled out a report. Afterwards he sat outside and drank beer and barbecued chicken. He cooked beans, made a salad, ate, and then smoked more cigarettes and drank more beer and worked on a bid down the street from the historical register house. After that he went to bed.

His phone woke him at midnight. The police had found his car. It was left in the middle of an intersection downtown. They had apprehended four people and his car was towed to a police impound lot. He hung up the phone and went back to bed.

He woke early the next morning to let Early out and saw Russell sitting on the lawn chair waiting. His face was beat up. Both his eyes were black and his little nose was swollen.

Eddie told him to come inside and wait in the kitchen. He went to his bedroom and dressed. When he came out Russell was on the kitchen floor petting Early.

"Can you still chew with your face that beat up?"

The boy nodded.

"I'll make pancakes," Eddie said. "You want bacon with them?"

Russell again nodded.

Eddie started the coffee and bacon and fed Early. The boy sat at the kitchen table and remained silent as Eddie made the pancakes and then set the food on plates and sat down.

"Let's eat first," Eddie said. "We got some talking to do but that's hard on an empty stomach. You probably didn't eat last night, did you?"

Russell shook his head and tears welled in his eyes but he ate the breakfast. When he finished Eddie put down his fork and pushed his plate away. "Let's go outside so I can smoke," he said and they went out and sat across from each other on lawn chairs.

"So what happened?"

"He stuck my head in the toilet," Russell whispered and began crying. "Until... Until I told him where you kept the key to it." He began crying then so hard he was barely understandable. He gasped, "I'm sorry... I'm sorry... I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault," Eddie said. "I would have told him, too. Try and take a breath."

Russell wiped his eyes and tried to breathe. "I told him where the keys were, but I didn't think it would start. I thought the switch would be on but it wasn't."

Eddie blew out a plume of smoke. "I must have left it off. I was tinkering on the car the other night and I must have just forgot. So then what happened?"

"When it started, I was like, oh no, and then Curtis made me go with them so I would be blamed, too. He drove out near the river and then we went downtown. Burny and Josh were in the back and Curtis was driving too fast and you said that the engine was old and needed to be driven slow. But Curtis wouldn't listen and then we came to that big intersection that has all those different lights and streets. We came to the middle of it and I reached down and hit the kill switch."

"You hit the kill switch?" Eddie said and laughed.

"I did," Russell said. "Cause you're my best friend."

"What happened?"

"Curtis knew I did something but he didn't know what. So he just started hitting me. He hit me over and over and Burny and Josh were laughing and cars started honking. I guess there was a cop nearby 'cause he came and saw Curtis hitting me and then Curtis started trying to hit the cop and then they knew the car was stolen and they took us away. My mom came and got me, but she left Curtis there."

"All that really happened?"

"I'm not a liar anymore."

Eddie nodded.

“Do you want me to leave now?”

Eddie shook his head. “I can’t believe you risked your life for a piece of shit old car.”

“It’s not a piece of shit,” Russell said and wiped his eyes. He shook his head back and forth.

“So what are you doing today?”

Russell shook his head.

“I just got a job doing a remodel on a house near the river. I don’t start for a month but they just gutted the whole first floor and there’s an old claw foot tub they’re throwing out. The head contractor said I could have it. I was thinking we pick it up and then I gotta do a bid in the hills and then we’ll eat some lunch. After that we’ll pick up a new toilet and sink. A friend of mine is coming tomorrow to tile the bathroom. I have to get the shower out and gut the bathroom tonight so he has room.”

“You’re re-doing the bathroom?”

Eddie nodded.

“Does that mean Monica’s coming back?”

“No,” Eddie said and laughed. “I’m just getting old and my back hurts. I think sitting in the bath might help. Are you too beat up to help?”

Russell shook his head. “I can help,” he said. “My face hurts but nothing else does. I told Curtis that he didn’t have the guts to hit me in the face. I knew he’d hit me in the face then and when the cops and my mom saw how bad I looked I knew they wouldn’t let him come back.”

“That’s pretty smart thinking,” Eddie said. “And just so you know I’m pressing charges against Curtis for stealing the car. With all that and hitting the cop and his priors he’ll be in some shit for a while. But sooner or later, eventually, he’ll be back.”

“I know,” Russell said. “But I’m going to start growing soon. I know I will.”