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A TASTE OF ASHES

He opened the front door and stumbled out onto the darkened front porch, a humiliated and tormented expression on his face. A branch from a scrub pine by the corner of the porch brushed his skin unnoticed, as he followed the cracked and broken sidewalk around the side of the house to the garage. He leaned on the handle of the garage door for a moment and then slid it open, his nerves wincing at the sound of the complaining metal. The side of the car felt cold against his hands. He smelled the mixed odor of stale tobacco smoke and Marge's perfume as he slid under the wheel and started the motor. The tires made a crunching sound as he backed out of the driveway and dipped onto the pavement.

He passed the few cars that were on the almost deserted street without bothering to drop his eyes from the glare of their headlights, and the wind buffeted his face through the open window. Slowly, his features lost their look of painful resignation, as they usually did when he got away from Marge. However, the sound of her voice still echoed in his ears: "You didn't think I'd be satisfied with a loser like you for the rest of my life, did you?" The sight of her pale nakedness and the look of defiance on Cosgrove's face were locked in his mind as if branded there. "Don't just stand there with that martyred look on your face," she said. "Go on. Go back to your whiskey and your women. Get out," she screamed, "Get out!"

He braked the car for a red light and then accelerated through the intersection as it changed. It had been like this for a long time now. The cold sarcasm with which she spoke to him, the lack of feeling when he made love to her . . . Whose fault was it...? Hers...? His...? He didn't know. He had stopped thinking about what people said. Ignore it; that was easiest. But tonight in his own house..., in his own bed..., when she knew he was coming home sooner or later. They didn't even try to hide.

His reflexes guided the car through the streets toward the edge of the city without his mind realizing it. He turned onto the road that led along the oceanfront and, looking over the side of the road, he saw the beach, a smooth strip of sand along the water's edge. The road was a black ribbon in front of him with the green darkness of the trees on one side, and the lead-colored waves on the other. Farther out, away from the beach, the wind whipped wavetops and left glowing foam which cascaded down the side of each wave to disappear. Foam-capped, undulating blackness, waves and foam, appearing and disappearing without end, and yet always the same.

He and Marge had spent their honeymoon at Eastport on the beach. They had rented a small cottage that looked out over the ocean. The first night they had made love there on the sand, right next to the water. The moonlight turned her skin white like the foam; her body was hard and firm in the pale, cold light. Even then, there had been a hint of coldness, of futility, a chill like spray from the ocean. He hadn't understood why, but it hadn't mattered so much then. They were young and they were happy. At least that was what he thought at the time.

His tires made a singing sound on the rough black-top, and his headlights ate up the white line that divided the blackness of the road. On and on he went, gradually picking up speed. The trees became a blur on his left, and the water undulated into nothingness on his right. There was no moon, only the stars and the probing beams of his headlights. Several miles ahead, where the road reached its highest point, the cliffs dropped away into the ocean. His heart quickened and his hands were moist on the steering wheel, as he remembered the jagged rocks at the bottom where the foam flew in the air and then make delicate patterns in the water.

He and Marge had never been able to have children. When he went to the doctor two years after they were married, he was told that there was nothing wrong with him. Things had gotten worse when he suggested that she see a doctor too. Not long after that he began to have suspicions, and there was the guy from the bar who kept showing up. There were others too, he knew. It was as if she were searching for something that she didn't have, and he couldn't give her. Evidently she never found it, because she kept on looking, and now there was Cosgrove.

He thought they felt love for each other, but now it had become so stressful and, at times, so painful that it was impossible to feel love, with their constant bickering, and Marge's increasing unfaithfulness. Out of self-defense, so he told himself, he had gone with other women, but that hadn't solved anything. The cold shadow of his relationship with Marge had dissipated any possible warmth or satisfaction in those other relationships. And then he started drinking.

He knew it couldn't go on like this. It affected his job, his health, his friends... everything. And after tonight... but it did no good to continue thinking about it, remembering, hurting. Just drive. Just let the glare of his headlights consume the darkness, bringing him closer... to what? The cliffs? Yes, the cliffs, high and windy, with the foam and rocks at the bottom.

His foot twitched nervously on the accelerator and then began pressing steadily. There were no other cars on the road now, and he was alone with the sense of speed and movement wrapped around him. The car rocked as he rounded a curve, beginning the climb that would take him to the top. The white line became a blur and the wind tore at his face and hair through the open window. He had a momentary vision of Marge with the wind tearing her clothes until it accented her breasts and thighs which became colder and colder in the frigid blast.

His speed increased and he glanced at the speedometer as the needle crept forward. He gripped the wheel fiercely as if the force of his hands could propel the car even faster. Marge was back there with Cosgrove in the warm softness of his own bed. His warmth and her coldness... warmth and coldness... The wind and tires screamed as he hurtled through the blackness, and the water continued dropping away at his side.

His headlights now reached the topmost point and the beams probed the nothingness beyond. He was almost there. His back and stomach ached, and his hands were white as he gripped the steering wheel. Just a little farther. The guard-rail was a blur in front of him with the blackness stretching out behind, but would be defenseless before the overwhelming energy of his forward movement. His eyes were glued to the rail as it hurtled toward him, his mind and body straining ever forward, pressing him back

into the seat underneath him. Blasting, then, suddenly into the blank determination of his consciousness was the sharp report of a tire that blew out, followed by the sensation of the car swerving toward the barrier of the looming guard-posts. Instinctively, he fought the twisting wheel as the car careened into and through the curve at the top of the cliff, and then slowed and shook as the tire disintegrated, gradually coming to a bumpy stop at the side of the road.

His head leaned forward on the steering wheel, and he reached for the key to turn off the motor. His leg was trembling so badly that he couldn't hold it on the brake to keep the car from moving down the incline on the far side of the cliffs. He reached for the emergency brake and pulled; he slumped backward into the seat, and shut his eyes still trembling, his energy spent. It was finished now. What had stopped him? The tire? Some unconscious instinct for survival?

After a few minutes, he opened the door and forced his body to move to the rear of the car and open the trunk. He fumbled for the jack and the wrench, and then lifted out the spare. As he removed what was left of the ruined tire it burned his hands, but he scarcely noticed. His mind was numbed by a sense of defeat, and the smell of burnt rubber filled his mouth with an acrid taste. A cool night wind ruffled his hair and a sense of freshness began to mingle with his sense of failure as his body finally relaxed. He took a deep breath and opened his hands to relieve the remaining tension. He felt drained and weak, but he also felt invigorated. As he shivered in the cold wind, his body responded with renewed energy. He was still alive, and he realized that he was never going to give up. Instead, he felt a sense of closure. Something had ended, and now that it was over, he began to feel a sense of freedom and release.

He tightened the nuts on the spare wheel and replaced the wheel cover. He put the tools in the trunk and, as he opened the door of the car, he noticed that the sky in the east over the ocean was beginning to show signs of light. As he drove slowly back toward the city, the light got stronger and a sense of renewal began to flow through his body. As he reached the outskirts of the city, he could see the sun beginning to appear on the horizon with the start of a new day. Perhaps this was what was necessary to rid himself of the sense of futility that had come to permeate his existence. As he saw the orange body of the sun begin to rise out of the water, it reminded him of Miss Richardson, in his high school English class, when they discussed Greek mythology and the story of a bird called a phoenix that rose out of the ashes to begin a new life. He took another deep breath and drove forward into his new existence.

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