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1,000 Word Count

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Sweet Tea Suicide

By T D Lethe

“Sometimes I want to run the car off the bridge, with all of you kids in it,” Dad gripes, as if this was the first time he has ever voiced this thought aloud. A dark confession that started off as an intrusive thought but grew into an obsessive daydream.

I could almost see the torrent of water rushing under the bridge’s support system, pushing over its usual banks and flooding areas hidden just out of sight. The last week has been nothing but rain.

With newfound height, the water could easily swallow our dingy van and drag us further down the river, and weeks would pass before it drained away. Each day would reveal a little more of our waterlogged van until it was on full display along with the other dumped junk and abandoned vehicles. Nobody bothered reporting them anyway.

I tried to keep my breath from shuddering too noticeably and closed my eyes, deliberately not looking to see how high the water had risen today. Seeing it wouldn’t help; it only made my imagination much more vivid.

I count slowly, waiting to feel the subtle bump that signified the end of the bridge and the arrival of the dirt road.

“The tires are stripped down already,” Dad jabs his finger against his 32oz gas station sweet tea, already half-way gone even though we had only been in the car for 20 minutes. Styrofoam shrieks as he digs his nails in. “If anyone ever found us, they would think we swerved out of control. Like it was an accident.”

He thought people would mourn us, cry for our family's tragic demise, maybe even pray for us.

Though they would think we all deserved it and that Dad was a saint for putting up with us.

I idly trace the spot on the door where the handle used to be, its jagged edges catching against dry skin and tear viciously into already torn skin. Drops of blood pool to the surface. For a moment, I think of opening the door and throwing myself out, damn the consequences that followed. It had to be better than being trapped in this never-ending state of pandering and hyper-vigilance.

But the door was jammed and wouldn't open even if I put all my strength in it. It had been that way ever since Dad had taken a bat to it in a fit of rage. The reason for it is lost to other countless acts of misplaced anger.

I work to keep my grip and posture perfectly relaxed.

Last time he had brought up his fantasies of killing us, he described in perfect detail how the unmarked revolvers in the gun cabinet would be used to shoot us in our sleep. He explained how he would use a silencer to make sure nobody would hear it coming. He would kill me last, because my room had a door that would shriek when opened, and I was too light a sleeper to go first. Then he would kill himself, right outside the house.

He had to give up on that dream when the keys to his cabinet disappeared, and all the guns he left lying around the house had been mysteriously locked inside behind its cool glass exterior. He blamed mom for it.

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I stare at the end of the bridge, fiddling with the cord around my neck and praying the metal that hung from it didn't jangle and give me away.

I pretend not to notice when the car jerks to the side before straightening and he laughs about how he was just joking; he wasn't going to do it now.

My lack of amusement causes him to tell ill-humored jokes, an attempt to ease his own discomfort.

He keeps at it until we're in the driveway, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction. After he parks, he leaves his sweet tea forgotten in the cupholder. My own untouched drink lies beside it.

I distribute the treats I managed to convince Dad into buying among my siblings and whisper about a sleep-over in my room, attendance mandatory, don't tell Mom, don't tell Dad. They nod silently and pad off to collect their blankets in secret. I mourn their learned stealth and curse the higher power that placed us in such a miserable place.

I then go to Mom, gently place my hand against her arm and wait for her attention to listlessly slide over to me, as I had been taught. I whisper that Dad was upset about the state of the tires and that she should probably make an appointment with the mechanic to replace them before he yelled at her too. She nods and goes to fetch her phone.

I grab the cord hanging around my neck and inhale as much air as I can force into my shrinking lungs.

My room will need to be fixed to accommodate my siblings.

The door will need to be opened and closed, until the annoying squeak is louder than before.

The beds moved out of direct eyesight and my desk used as a barrier.

And the gun hidden inside my hollow bed frame would need to be reloaded, safety checked, and the sight line adjusted.

The others would sleep through the night, while I stayed vigilant, listening for the rattling of locked doors and displaced floorboards. Straining to hear quiet footsteps creeping up wooden stairs. Anticipating the clack of ammunition being slid into the chamber.

Maybe it would be like the last few times, and the night would pass peacefully, just another sleepless night of anxiety and prayers.

Or maybe tonight would be the last time I had to wear heavy cabinet keys against my chest.