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Coins

by Justin Katz

it wasn't my fault

Crying. Crying. A girl curled up with her arms around her knees. Crying. Light hair hanging like a long hood. Shaking. Crying. I reached out my hand, a mistake, but not my hand, I felt safe. The hand that wasn't mine curled around a quivering shoulder. Crying. Crying. Shaking. "Linda?" The girl turned slowly on an axis, opening solid green eyes which oozed blood as tears. I followed the tears down that beautiful face. Watched them rolling past her nose, now with slivers of blood seeping from the nostrils, watched them sliding down the curve toward her lips, all the time dissolving the skin over which it flowed. Watching as the tears passed through the corners of the lips, pooling, then gathering on her chin. The lips opened and said, in Linda's shaking childish voice, "Why? Why?" I started to back up, feeling the drip-drip-dripping of red droplets on her blue jeans, holding together momentarily then drifting into starry stains, but Linda grabbed my hands and pushed them against her face, using my hands to fiercely rub at the cracking and peeling skin, "Wash me, Erol, wash me." "Stop it!" I screamed, "I didn't do anything wrong! It was you!" "Wash me!" "No! I can't, I'm too..." Shaking. Lonely. Misunderstood. "sorry." I closed my eyes to stop my own tears, blue crystals. When I opened them again, Linda was gone. "I'm sorry." Linda was gone, but her blood was still on my hands, which were clenched in fists. Burning. Slicing. I dropped my brows in curiosity as

my fingers (not my hands!) opened and I saw that I held in each a razor blade. Her blood was mine.

i will make amends

“You did it,” said a voice from behind me. I turned to see Linda’s father pull his hands from his disheveled crazy hair and point at me, “*You did it!*” Then, like a mob around a witch, the voices were all around me, rising, as if from graves. Chanting, “you did it. You did it. You Did It. YOU DID IT!” “No no,” I said, “it wasn’t my fault.” I tried to run, but they were on me. In me. Holding me. Scratching. My mouth and my nostrils filled with a thick sour liquid. My eyes were stinging. My ears were ringing: ring like the...

Telephone. It was the telephone.

it wasn't my fault alone

I panted and looked around the room. The simple wood walls of a Vermont bed and breakfast cabin, a twenty-inch black-and-white television, my clothes strewn amongst the bottles of rum, Bacardi Dark, six in all, five empty. I rubbed my eyes and staggered toward the bureau and the phone.

“Hello?”

“Erol.”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“It’s Tom,” said the familiar voice across a barrier of static, “it’s good to hear...” he trailed off, “Erol, Jake’s dead.”

I let the phone slide away from my ear. *Jake’s dead*. That meant it was just us. Tom and me. Neither of us whose fault it was alone. Jake had been in Boston. Not that far, not that far at all. Tom was in Ohio. I was closer.

“Erol? Erol, are you there?” pleaded a tinny voice from the phone.

I grabbed the receiver and said, as best as I could, “what do we do?”

“I’m running. I’m driving until I get to California, and then,” and here Tom paused, there was no *and then*, “and then I’ll figure out what to do next.”

“Do you really think you can escape?”

“Yes! I don’t think it can follow us just anywhere. We’ve just gotta disappear. Jesus Christ! There are four billion people in this world! It can’t track us down everywhere! We *have* to be able to get lost.”

“What if it’s in our heads.”

“*What?*”

“Our heads... all in it.”

“No. It’s not.”

“Wait for me,” I said.

“You’re nine hours away!”

“Tom. Wait for me. At the first service station in Ohio on 80.”

“But...”

“Tom.”

For a moment there was silence over those thousand odd miles of wiring. Then, “OK.”

“Good,” I said, “I’ll be there as fast as I can.”

I hung up the phone and threw on the nearest outfit and chucked some more dirty clothes in my bag. Halfway out the door, I paused. I removed a small ball of paper from the front pocket of my bag and carefully unwrapped it, revealing a small silver coin with the picture of an eye on each side indistinguishable. Placing it on the palm of my hand, I could feel it pulse and burn. My eyes seemed to flicker and then I was flying west over snow covered mountains and

plains. I could feel Tom pacing in his small hotel room in Ohio, sipping whiskey and thinking... thinking... *it's coming.*

With that thought, I dropped the coin and stared at it, laying harmlessly on the rug of a Vermont bed and breakfast next to a splash of paisley. *We each had one, I thought, if only we'd had the time to learn what they really meant.* Then a glimmer of hope entered what was an otherwise desperate mind, *maybe I should leave it here. Maybe Jake should have thrown his in the ocean. Maybe then he'd still be...*

I grabbed the coin (and tossed it, end over end, in the air, and held it against the back of my hand. It burned. I looked. *Eyes, I thought, I take it.*) and the last bottle of rum and ran out into a wind that seemed to carry my name on the snowflakes.

i will make amends

The Green mountains were being covered by a blanket of white, and a commercial repeated itself to me on the radio "buybuy", when a shadow appeared on the side of the road.

At first I thought it was a woman: some lost girl hitching on an unlucky night. I took a swig of my rum and when I looked up, there was nothing but a small swaying pine tree where the girl had been.

"Great," I said out loud, "now I'm seeing things."

I glanced my red eyes over a precipice and saw only snow falling to an invisible bottom.

But further up the road I saw another hitcher. It looked a lot like Frank, but he turned out to be a mirage.

I laughed and drank more rum. A low hanging cloud on my high mountain settled around me. I turned on my fog lights. After a while, I could see a human shape on the side of the road, and could almost see into its dark, dead eyes before the fog thickened.

I sped up. *Surely*, I reasoned, *there couldn't be more than three hitchhikers on this stretch.*

But, surely, there was another shadow, then another. I pushed down on the pedal and watched as the shadows came and went more quickly. Faster. And more. I laughed hysterically and turned my beloved bottle to my lips. Still the shadows appeared. One then the next, until they looked like a picket fence mob.

Suddenly, Jake stood in the road and didn't so much as flinch as the headlights picked him up and shone off his skin, making him look like an angel. I slammed down on the brake and turned the wheel, too late to miss the way Jake's eyes seemed to suck in the light as it bore down on him.

The car spun freely until it bent around an old tree. I was surrounded by the soft embrace of an air bag. It smelled of plastic. Resisting the urge to rest, I grabbed my bag and left, trudging through snow up to my knees.

i will make it right

The snow twirled around me in its crazy dance and it seemed the wind whispered, "Erol. Erol."

The snow crunched under my feet as I ran aimlessly through the trees.

"Erol. Erol."

I slipped and fell to my knees and took a moment to breath, my hands buried in the cold snow.

"Erol. Erol."

I got up and ran until a single icy finger trailed up my spine and held me frozen. I fell on my back, unable to rise. I saw a white shadow flitting from tree to tree around me.

"Erol. Erol. Give. Me. What. You. Owe."

I grabbed the coin from my pocket and waved it about like a white flag, “here, take it! Take it! Just leave me alone!”

A shriek started to my left and made a counter clockwise spiral towards me.

The coin was snatched from my hand and placed on my forehead, where I could feel it searing at the skin. I could smell my flesh melting. I screamed. “I didn’t do anything!” Looking up into the white shroud of the thing before me, I saw no face. No face at all. Just two big green eyes.

all will be forgiven

I can see the moon through the trees. Nearly full. I can smell the cold dampness of the snow. I can hear the wolves howl as they get closer. Closer. Closer. But I’m helpless to move. All I can do is lie here and wait. Wait and wonder how much time Tom has left. Maybe he’ll just get fed up and leave in time to escape. Maybe there’s no escape. Maybe he’ll just leave the coin there on the table next to lukewarm coffee and go.

Whether he lives or dies doesn’t seem to matter to me. It’s not my fault. Anyway, he’s the last. As soon as those howls get closer, he’s the last. All will be forgiven. As soon as I close my eyes, he’s the last. And I can feel them. Closer.

Closer.

I wonder if he can, too.

all will be forgiven