

Beneficial

by Craig Lancaster

When I told Amber I was leaving her for Caroline, she was pretty broke up about it. Part of that, I'm sure, was because she really expected that we had some sort of future beyond furtive screwing at night after her old man fell all the way into his bottle of Jack. I mean, I'm not going to sit here and lie and tell you I didn't cut the edges off the truth to get into her pants. I did. I was nineteen and dumb and horny as all hell, and I leaned on any advantage I had when it came to screwing. If I could somehow go back and visit the kid I was then, I'd kick his ass for a lot of things, but what I did or didn't tell Amber would be pretty low on that list, I have to say. Was I using her? Yeah, in a manner of speaking, but no more than she was using me.

Also, I imagine she was pissed off that I told her as we lay on the bed in my motel room, out of breath, the swelter of night moving across our bodies like a mop. Had I said something before, she might could have saved a little face by telling me to go to hell before we tumbled into the covers. All right. Again, I was no gentleman. Send me to hell. Whatever. I lay there on my back, my arm around her, and listened to the bug zapper do its work while Amber cried. I felt bad about that. Not bad enough to stay, but bad.

More than anything, though, I think she was just upset that Caroline was a car.

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"So that's it, then? You're leaving?"

I'd driven back to the Wagon Wheel from the gas station across the street, after pumping Caroline full of high test. My pop's green canvas flight bag, the only thing of his I got after he was blown all to shit in Nam, sat on the concrete stoop outside my motel room door. Once it was in the backseat, Caroline and I would be pointing our noses north.

"Job's done. No reason to stay."

I did the once-around on Caroline, rubbing out a couple of splashes of fresh tar on her fender. A robust yawn while driving through Kit Carson would cause you to miss the little shitbird town, but damned if the whole Colorado Department of Highways hadn't converged on her that summer to rebuild Highway 40.

"You could stay for me. Better, I could go with you."

I slipped past her and hooked my arm through the flight bag's handles.

"I ain't ready for that."

She stepped into my wake, her voice rising, talking to the back of my head. "You were sure ready for everything else. I guess if it was beneficial to you, nothing else matters, huh?"

I dropped the bag into Caroline's back seat and slammed the door. "You were, too, goddammit! You're the one who came sniffing around my door that first night."

"Fuck you, Ray."

"Exactly."

"What?"

"I said, you fucked me, Ray."

I shouldn't have said it. Amber, she flew into a godawful rage. She reached for the keys to Caroline, which I dangled out of reach. Then she reached for my shirt and tore the breast pocket off that.

"You love a car," she screamed at me. "It'll never love you back, and nobody else will, either."

She stomped off into the motel office, where her mother, a little rodent of a woman who hadn't said two words to me all summer, was no doubt watching and wishing me dead.

I unbuttoned the shirt and threw it into the backseat, then opened my daddy's bag and found a T-shirt I could slip into. I slid into the seat and coaxed Caroline to life.

Where the motel parking lot T-boned the highway, I took a quick look left and right and then laid down a scratch as I aimed Caroline toward Denver.

I've replayed that moment so many times in my head, and always, it's the sound of rubber first and the quick, screaming pain next, a

split-second behind, as Caroline's back window shattered and the diffused glass shot into my skin. I whipped my head around and saw Amber there, straddling the yellow highway line, the pistol held in both hands. I stomped on the gas and Caroline was equal to the task, and we got the hell out of there, and that's the God's honest truth.

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So, anyway, that's what happened. Oh, I was hot. I was digging pieces of glass out of my shoulders and neck and hair for days, and a new back window set me back some dough once I got to Denver. But I'm not pissed anymore. I did what I had to do in leaving, and I guess Amber did what she felt like she had to when she shot at me. She was five or six years older than me, which means she'd be getting close to fifty now. She's probably on grandchildren now, probably already told her girls, if she had any, to stay away from the likes of me. I like to wonder about what happened to her, since I really have no way of finding out now. The way her old man drank, he couldn't have been long for the world. Maybe she got the Wagon Wheel. Or maybe the guy she hoped would take her away from Kit Carson showed up and did just that. I don't know.

Me, I've been here for twenty-three years, waiting out my days. Caroline's long gone. I get a new bunkmate from time to time. They always end up going, and I always end up staying. It'll be that way until it's not, until the day I don't wake up when they do bed check.

I have all the time I could ever want to think about anything I want.

More often than not, I think about Amber.

