

The Big Cross

by Daniel Crocker

THE BIG CROSS

Carl was talking to his twin sister, Kate, who had dreamed of a glowing cross lighting up the desert.

"It's real," Kate said. "I Googled it. It's in Texas."

"It sounds like a coincidence," Carl said. It was 8:22 and time to make announcements at Irondale High, where he was the new vice principal and had once been known as Little Carl. He'd given up a job in administration at St. Louis Community College and moved back to the country to be with his sister. A year later she'd been diagnosed with ALS.

"It's huge," Kate said. "Skyscraper huge."

"Send me a link. I'll take a look."

"Just come over after work. I'll show you."

Kate and her husband Terry owned a small bar and grill. They'd done well enough, but Kate still liked to wait tables. Broke up the boredom, she said. Then her back started hurting, and she felt tired all the time. She told herself she was just getting old. Then she started dropping things, plates and trays, and her arms shook sometimes. She knew then what it was. It had killed Lou Gehrig and it had killed her mother and now, she figured, it was going to kill her.

Dr. Bremer said she could die within the year. "It's progressing quickly," he said. "But some people live a very long time. Stephen Hawking, for example."

"Who else?" Kate asked. "Name one other person." Dr. Bremer couldn't.

There had only been a ten percent chance Kate would inherit her mother's disease Dr. Bremer had said, and her bad luck filled her with, if not exactly pride, then a sense of destiny.

Carl arrived at his sister's house a little after four. His head hurt. He had suspended a kid, normally a quiet kid, a good student, for having half an ounce of marijuana in his locker. His girlfriend had ratted him out because he'd taken Amanda Green mudding in his pickup. The police had to be called and as the boy was being escorted away, his girlfriend came running out of Biology dragging her book bag behind her and screaming, I'm sorry, Tim. I'm so sorry. You can't be sorry enough, Tim said. But I forgive you anyway, baby. Sarah, Carl's secretary, thought it was sweet. For Carl it was just a big mess.

Kate was at the kitchen table with her poodle, Rocky, asleep at her feet and snoring—it had emphysema. Terry sat opposite Kate, his pie-face unreadable. His arms were thin and tattooed, and he was holding a cigarette that badly needed tipping. The table was covered in computer print outs of pictures and maps.

“Look,” Kate said, pointing to a picture of the cross. It was white and an eighteen wheeler was parked at its base to give it scale. The picture had a smudged, surreal quality. “This is what I dreamt.”

“You dreamed the picture or the cross?” Carl asked.

This stopped her for a moment. She tried to think of the right thing to say. She and Carl still looked a lot alike. Bright red hair, nearly six feet tall, broad faces and identical green eyes. Kate was still freckled, though not as heavily as when she was a kid.

Kate pointed at the picture of the cross again. “I know this is it. It's the second largest cross in the Western Hemisphere. It's 190 feet tall, can you believe that?”

Terry whistled, like you might if your dinner bill was fifty dollars higher than you thought it would be. Carl picked up Terry's pack of menthols even though he'd quit a few years earlier. He almost lit one, but thought better of it and slid them back toward Terry. He drummed his fingers against the coffee stained doily that covered the table. Kate hated that thing, but Terry's mother had made it for them as a wedding present. It had once been beautiful.

"We have to go," Kate said. "Right away." Her hands were shaky as she pushed the picture toward her brother. She assumed Carl would take her.

"I thought you were over all of this God stuff?" Carl said.

"I'm starting over," Kate said.

"It would be a nice trip for you and Terry. It will be good for the two of you to get away for a few days."

Kate snorted. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"I believe you had a dream, but it all seems odd."

"I can't go," Terry said, as if just realizing there was a conversation going on around him. "I need to watch the restaurant. Besides, I have no desire to go."

Carl looked back and forth between his sister and brother-in-law. They'd been married eleven years and never had children.

Kate took her brother's hand with both of hers. "We have to go," she said.

"What do you think, Terry?" Carl hoped for some measure of common sense.

"I think you're going to take her," Terry said. "So just agree to it and get it over with."

Carl took a personal day and arrived at his sister's house Friday morning. She was sitting on the couch in plaid pajamas. There was a brown suitcase beside her; they'd had it since they were kids. Although faded, the *Transformers* sticker Carl had put on it was still there. The trip would take close to eleven hours, and Carl planned to make it in one long stretch, get a hotel somewhere near Groom, and be back home in plenty of time for *Saturday Night Live*.

"Are you going to get dressed?" Carl asked.

"It's a long drive," she said. "I may as well be comfortable, and it's not like I'm indecent."

Carl picked up the suitcase; it was heavy.

"What have you got in here?" Carl curled the suitcase like it was a barbell.

“Just stuff.” She held the front door open for him. “You could use some exercise anyway. Do you think Sarah wants to go out with flab-o-arms?”

Kate's teasing had an edge. He'd had a crush on his secretary, Sarah, since his first week at work when she told Coach Brewer that if he called his new boss Little Carl one more time, she'd make sure his next check got lost. But despite his sister's prodding, Carl had never asked her out.

He stopped in the doorway, “Do you need to say goodbye to Terry or feed the dog or anything?”

“All taken care of.”

They were backing down the driveway when the back tire raised slightly, and there was a brief, loud yelp. Carl put the car in park and it slid another foot, gravel crackling under the tires, before it stopped.

“I think I just backed over Rocky,” he said. They got out to check. Kate was already tearing up and biting the collar of her pajamas. Fuck, Carl thought. Fuck. He pulled the dog out from underneath the car. Its midsection was flattened and the intestines had been pushed out, like corded ropes, from both the mouth and anus.

“Jesus,” Carl said. “I'm so sorry, sis.”

Kate bent over the corpse and stroked its head. Finally, she stood up, her eyes were red. “She was old and I think she had a good life, don't you?”

“Yes.”

“There's a shovel in the shed. I can't leave her like this.”

Carl folded his jacket neatly onto the back seat, rolled up his sleeves, and put Rocky in the Hefty brand garbage bag Kate brought him. It was a *Cinch Sak*, with a bright yellow draw string. As careful as he was, Carl ended up with blood on his shirt. It was late October and the ground was hard, but not yet frozen through. It took him forty-five minutes, and at one point he saw Terry's face, round and somber, staring out the kitchen window at him, smoking a cigarette.

“We'll have to stop by my place for another shirt,” he said, handing the shovel to Kate when it was done.

"It'll dry," she said, and brushed at the blood stain as if she could wipe it away with her hand. "I'm begging you, Carl. I feel like I need to get there soon."

There was no place to stop on Highway 32, and by the time they reached I-44, it was eleven am. They stopped in Rolla for hamburgers. .

"What is that?" The blond girl asked, leaning out of the drive-thru window to point at Carl's shirt. Carl didn't know what to say. The long drive had lulled him into a fantasy world, and he'd forgotten about the stain.

"Ketchup," Kate said. "We tried McDonald's first. Awful stuff, messy."

"Oh," the girl said. "Actually, I prefer them. Here's your food. You folks have a good day." As they pulled away, Kate patted her brother's thigh before leaning her head against the window and closing her eyes.

She didn't wake up until they were in Oklahoma. Carl stopped at a Wal-Mart in the very dry looking town of Glendale. Everything had a faint yellow tinge. It's just an illusion, Carl thought, dead and dried up grass, yellow and tan houses.

Carl shook his sister awake. "Can you get me a shirt?"

Kate stretched her arms, nearly poking her brother in the eye. "In my pajamas?"

"It's not like you're indecent," Carl said.

"Fine. What size and what kind?" Kate slipped on her shoes.

"Just get me a white one. They come in a plastic package and the brand name is *George*." Carl handed her some money.

Kate nodded and got out of the car. After about ten steps, she turned her head around, poked out her butt, and stuck her tongue out at Carl. Once she was out of sight, he took a book from his glove compartment—an old copy of *Spider-man: Kraven's Last Hunt*. He'd first read it in seventh grade, and had come back to it probably twenty times. He was lost in it when an old man knocked on his window.

"Hey," the man said. There was a black spot on his tongue.

Carl shook his head no. The man knocked again.

"I don't have any money," Carl said and waved the man away. He put his hand on the keys dangling from the ignition.

"I just need a dollar. I need to get to Texas. I have an aunt there. I need bus money."

"Go away," Carl said. "I don't have any money."

Carl saw his sister, a Wal-Mart bag dangling from one arm and her purse from the other. He started the car and rolled down the passenger's side window.

"Be careful, Kate," he said. She was approaching the man and digging through her purse for money. Carl opened his car door, pushing the man backwards with it.

"Hey," he said. "Be careful."

"I told you to go away," Carl said.

"I'm going to Texas," the man said.

"Me too," Kate said, as if that explained everything, and gave him ten dollars. He looked at it for a moment, stuffed it in his pocket and walked off.

Kate tossed her brother the Wal-Mart bag. He pulled a short sleeved, Hawaiian print shirt out of it.

"What this?" he asked.

"It was on clearance. Besides, I thought you'd look good in something with color."

"Damn it," Carl said. "Try to block me from people." He took off his blood-stained shirt. Kate stood facing him. The shirt was too small and stretched across his stomach. The gaps around the buttons hung open like mouths. Kate stuck her finger through one of them and poked Carl in the belly.

"You've put on a few. I can still fit in the same clothes I wore in high school, Little Carl."

Carl looked at his reflection in the car window. "I look like a tourist," he said. "A Glendale, Oklahoma, tourist. Well, screw it. Let's go."

In Tulsa, Kate decided she wanted a sit-down dinner. They stopped at Applebees and Carl ordered a steak and iced tea. Kate ordered a Miller Lite, no food.

"Is beer really healthy for you?"

"It relaxes my muscles." Kate fingered her hair, twisting it into red spirals. She was shaking.

"You're an adult. Do what you want."

Carl smiled at the waitress when she brought his food and ordered Kate another draft.

"She's pretty," Kate said. The girl looked to be in her early twenties, curly black hair, soft features. Carl nodded.

"You were looking at her," she said.

"I don't think so."

"How long's it been since you've been laid?"

"None of your business." Carl cut up his steak. He'd asked for it well done, but it was pink in the middle.

"Tell me it hasn't been since Belinda." When Carl didn't respond she said, "I bet it wasn't even good with Belinda. She was a cold fish. I could have told you it wouldn't work out."

"Then why didn't you?" Carl asked.

Kate shrugged. "You don't need someone as reserved as you are. You need someone like Sarah, don't you think?"

Carl didn't answer.

They turned west onto I-40, toward Amarillo. It was the last long stretch of highway before Groom. The sun had slipped into the horizon. Kate remarked on it. She thought the sun looked bigger in the west. Carl didn't notice a difference.

"Remember when we were kids and I was afraid to drive?"

"Sure," Carl said.

"Remember what you used to do?"

Carl gunned the engine and the car leaped forward.

"That's right," Kate said. "Used to scare me to death."

"Got you to take your driving exam at least."

“Not really. Sometimes I think part of the reason I put it off so long was because I loved the way it felt in your old truck on the back Irondale roads. I felt so out of control, so free. I loved it. I loved you and I knew you wouldn't let me get hurt.”

“That was a long time ago,” Carl said.

“Do it again. Please, Carl. There's not much traffic.”

“It's too dangerous.” Kate gripped Carl's knee. Please, she said again. One more time.

The '88 LaSabre didn't have the appetite for the road his old truck had, but Carl pushed down on the gas: 70mph, 80, 85. “Now,” Kate said. Carl turned off the headlights. Kate squealed and buried her head in Carl's shoulder. Look, he said, look. Kate lifted her head and all she could see were the reflectors that divided the lanes. She felt like she was being shot through space.

The man Carl almost hit was pushing an empty wheelchair down the shoulder of the highway. Kate insisted they pull over. The man was in his mid-thirties, deeply tanned. He was short, wearing a tight white T-shirt and jeans; his muscles seemed to Carl like traps set on a spring.

“Careful there, fella,” the man called out. “You could kill a guy driving like that.”

“You were walking pretty close to the highway,” Carl said.

“I guess I was. I've been walking a long way and you tend to lose track of things after a while. Then again you didn't have your lights on.”

“Do you need a ride?” Kate asked.

“No way,” Carl said.

“It's the least we can do,” she said. “We almost killed him.”

“I guess I could use a ride. I got business in Groom.”

“So do we,” Kate said. “That's where we're going.”

“Look, I don't mean any offense,” Carl said. “But we don't know you.”

“You're good to be cautious,” the man said. “These are troubling times. But I can assure you I'm on the Lord's work.”

Kate put her hand on the back of her brother's neck, pulled him close to her and whispered, "It's a sign. Please."

Carl had never admitted it, but even more than sadness, which he did feel, he'd mostly been overcome by guilt since his sister had been diagnosed. It could have easily been him. It might still be him, although the odds were against it. He questioned himself every day since she'd gotten the news. He'd been at the doctor's office with her and comforted her when she turned to him instead of Terry. He had even gone so far as to write himself a message on a yellow Post it and stick it in his wallet: *Am I wasting my life?*

The man folded up the wheelchair, put it in the back of the car and slid in after it.

"Name's Bill Reilly," he said.

Carl waited with his blinker on at the shoulder of the road for a break in traffic. "Like the guy on Fox news," he said.

"That's O'Reilly." Bill leaned close to the back of Carl's seat. His cologne was strong and spicy. "O'Reilly's no Christian."

"You should put your seat belt on," Carl said.

"No need when you're riding with the Lord." Bill patted Carl's shoulder and then squeezed it.

"Just to be safe," Kate said, turning around to get a better look at Bill. "I'm Kate, and this is my twin brother, Carl."

Bill snapped his seat belt shut. "You don't look like twins," he said. "I figured you for a married couple."

"We used to look alike," Kate said. "Then he got fat. Believe it or not, they used to call him Little Carl."

"He looks like a little Carl," Bill said and removed a flask from the front pocket of his jeans. He took a drink. The smell of whiskey was strong.

"Hey now," Carl said. "You can't drink that in here. It's against the law."

"I follow God's law," he said. "Would you like a drink?"

"I'm driving," Carl said. His sister, however, politely accepted.

"That's good," she said, handing the bottle back to Bill.

"So," Carl said, "what exactly is this work you're on?"

"I'll tell you. I sell these wheelchairs. Been at it for about six months now. I do pretty good."

"Then where's your car?"

"Don't you worry about that, Carl." Bill said. "It's good fortune I was picked up by you folks, seeing as we're going to the same place. Yep, I knew Groom was the place for me as soon as I heard about that cross."

"That's where we're going," Kate said.

"That's a good sign. You're good people. I heard about the cross from a trucker. Sold him a wheelchair. His wife needed it."

"So what do you do when you sell one?" Carl asked. "How do you get another one?"

"Don't be foolish, Carl." Bill said. "This is just a model. When I sell one, I write the buyer's name and address down and have the company send it. It's an even split out of five-hundred. I guess I sell about ten a month. You could say I got the magic touch."

"You've got the magic touch," Kate said. Bill handed her the flask again, and she took a drink. "I had a dream about the cross. I saw it in a vision."

"I don't doubt it," Bill said. "I can sense these things. My mother called it the eye of God. Not psychic, mind you, that's Lucifer's work. I sensed something about you right away."

"I bet," Carl said.

"That's right, Carl. Anyway, that trucker told me there's God fearing folks in Groom, and I didn't take him for a liar. I do good business with Christians. They know they can trust me."

"I can see that about you," Kate said.

"Thank you," Bill said. "I get that a lot. Take two folks like you, a pretty lady and the meek type. You wouldn't just pick up anybody."

"I'm not meek," Carl said.

"Don't be ashamed," Bill said and patted Carl's shoulder again. "This is a sinful world and the meek will inherit it. I know you wouldn't just pick up anyone. They might be a killer or something worse. But you picked me up. It's a gift I have. It's the reason I got into sales."

"I almost hit you," Carl said.

"Have you always been a salesman?" Kate asked.

"I worked in a bank for a while, but it wasn't for me. I was called to the open road. I started out selling Jesus Mirrors. Those sold well, but I get more of a cut from the wheelchairs. I make a lot more money even though I don't sell as many of them. And there's no sin in it. A man has to eat. Ain't that right, Carl?"

"Jesus Mirrors?" Carl said.

"Yes, Jesus Mirrors, Carl. Mirrors with the face of Jesus painted on them. Some of them have a Bible verse. 'Yea though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death' was my big seller."

"Figures," Kate said. "It's just morbid enough."

"Not morbid," Bill said. "It gives hope. Sold good in Arkansas especially. They mostly hung them in the living room."

"Interesting," Kate said.

"Yes it is," Bill said. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to sleep for a bit. Don't you two worry. You're safe with me."

Kate slept as well. Eventually, Carl's eyes began to blur. He couldn't see the exit signs until he was right up on them, and the lights from the cars in the other lane blinded him. He was close to the Groom exit, probably seventy miles away, but he pulled into the next town anyway. He filled the car up with gas and then woke Kate and Bill.

"I can't drive anymore," Carl said.

"How close are we?" Kate asked.

"Close, but it's getting too dangerous. So unless one of you wants to drive we're going to have to find a place to stay."

"You know I can't drive," Kate said.

"I've been drinking," Bill said. "I don't have a license anyway."

Carl untucked his shirt and felt better. "We're going to have to get a hotel." Bill was already climbing out of the backseat, dragging his wheel chair with him.

"You good folks go on ahead," he said. "There might be some business here."

"What about the cross?" Kate asked. "Don't you want to see it?"

"I'll get there," Bill said. "I've troubled you all enough. You two be careful who you pick up. There are bad folks out there."

"We will," Kate said.

"There's a miracle waiting for you," Bill said. "Funny things happen when people get down this way."

"Thank you," Kate said.

"One more thing." Bill unfolded his wheelchair. "You all in the need of one of these?"

"No," Carl said.

They only rented one room because Kate didn't want to stay alone. Carl lay down immediately, taking off only his shoes. He told his sister it was fine if she relaxed with some television as long as she kept it low. He was tired, but when he closed his eyes he could still see the highway behind his eyelids. When sleep finally came, he kept moving down a dark, endless road.

He woke a few hours later feeling sick at his stomach. Motion sickness, he thought. The television was off, but the lamp beside his bed was on. Carl looked over to the next bed. Except for the suitcase, it was empty.

"Kate," he said. There was no answer. He stood up, fighting off a moment of disorientation, and checked the bathroom. She was gone. Taking his cell phone off the night stand, he dialed her number. A muted ring came from inside of the suitcase. Carl opened it.

Kate's undergarments lay on top, silky and frilly, the sort you would wear on a date. He picked them up, held them for a moment, and set them aside. He saw what made the suitcase so heavy. Crosses, a hundred or so of them—plastic, silver, ceramic. Some had the emaciated figure of Jesus on them, most were plain. What does she think is going to happen, Carl thought.

He found the phone; there was a new text message from Terry: *I hope you and asshole are having a good time.*

Carl put his shoes back on and went into the bathroom to splash water on his face. His eyes were red. He'd heard music when they

were checking in and thought there must be a lounge. He found Kate there. She was sitting at the bar, wearing a red dress, cut low in the front, that brought out her hair and eyes. A drink sat in front of her, and she was talking to a young man. The lounge was crowded and the band had just started "Jessie's Girl" when Carl tapped her on the shoulder.

"Don't you think you're taking this drinking bit too far," he said.

"Carl," she said and wrapped her arms around his neck

. "This is Jim. Right, Jim?"

"Jim," the young man said.

Carl nodded at him before turning his attention back to his sister. "Really, we should get back to our room."

"Just have one drink," Kate said.

"No, and you're not having any more either." He picked up Kate's glass. It looked like whiskey and coke. He handed it to the bartender.

"Hey now," Jim said. "The lady can have a drink if she wants one."

"This lady," Carl said, "is married. She's also dying."

Kate stood up and left without saying a word. Carl followed her to the room, but she wouldn't speak to him. She locked herself in the bathroom, and Carl could hear the muted sound of running water. He knocked on the door.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to say that."

"Fuck you," she said.

"Really. I didn't mean to. I'm sorry, okay?"

"And I said fuck you."

Carl took off his shoes again and set them beside the bed. It felt good to lie down. He was worried about Kate, he was sorry, but the sound of running water lulled him to sleep.

He could feel something stuck in his side. It tickled at first, but then it started to hurt. When he woke up, Kate was lying beside him and she had an inch of his fat between her fingers. She was squeezing so hard her face was red.

"I was drinking Diet Coke," she said. "And I was enjoying myself you self-centered cocksucker."

She sat up on the side of the bed and wobbled a bit before getting her balance. She was wearing a nightgown, white and sheer, with nothing underneath it.

"It's not like you haven't seen my tits before," she said. "Mother bathed us together until she died." Kate began to sob and her freckles blossomed into dark stars across her face. "I'm going to die too," she said.

Carl wanted to comfort her, but he didn't know what to do. He'd rehearsed this moment a thousand times in his head, and each time he'd said something profound. But now he found he could say nothing worthwhile.

"You're not going to die," she said. "Not you."

"I'm sorry."

"I believe you really are sorry, and I hate you for it." She lay down next to Carl, resting her head on his shoulder. They'd not slept like that since they were kids haunted by nightmares of their mother's death. Their father, Big Carl, had died a little bit with his wife and paid no attention to them. Carl had withdrawn from people, focusing on his schoolwork, while Kate, before her twelfth birthday, started doing meth. Carl found her using it half-naked with the old guy next door. He went back home, got his father's gun, and shot the man in the leg. The man couldn't report him, of course, and he moved shortly afterwards.

"And I'm going to be ugly, too," Kate said. "Twisted and ugly."

"No you're not," Carl said. "You'll always be beautiful. And there's still the cross."

Kate propped herself up on her elbow, leaned over Carl and kissed him. After a few moments, she stopped. "You kissed me back."

Carl didn't respond.

"I'm so sorry, Carl," she said. She stood up and went to her own bed. "You can't be in love with me. It's gross, and as you so elegantly put it, I'm dying anyway."

Kate was in a good mood the next morning. She hummed as she dressed. Carl was quiet and nervous. She finally sat down beside him, squeezed his hand and said, "Lighten up."

"You were drunk last night," Carl said.

"Seriously, lighten up. I worry about what's going to happen to you. I really do."

"Let's go to the cross. Let's just see what happens."

When they were 25 miles from Groom, they could already see the cross. It grew larger and larger until they found themselves in its shadow. The parking lot had a smattering of cars in it. The second largest cross in the Western Hemisphere did good business.

Carl parked the car. The cross loomed above them.

"It's now or never," he said.

"Wait," Kate said. "I have to say something."

"Go ahead."

"I slept with that guy last night. We did it in the back of the hotel, right in front of someone's door. We didn't even use protection."

"Oh."

"Do you think God will hold that against me?"

"I don't think so," Carl said. "Terry might." Kate dismissed it with a wave of her hand.

"Let's go," Carl said, pointing to the cross.

To Carl, once he was up close, the cross looked like a Titan from mythology—a giant with arms spread open. There was a plaque and a small statue of a baby at the bottom of it. *Choose Life* it read.

"It's a dilly."

"It's ugly," Kate said. "Just steel and white paint."

"I can't believe it. Look."

Bill was walking toward them, pushing his wheelchair and smiling. He waved. Kate reached out and touched the cross. She closed her eyes and after a moment withdrew her hand.

"Do you feel any different?" His voice was pleading.

"Today-day," she said, as if speaking into a great microphone, "I consider myself-self-self. The Luckiest . . ."

“Man man man,” Carl said.

“Please Carl,” his sister said. “Please.”

He looked up. It was nothing but steel and white paint. Bill waved again. Carl waved back.

