

Chattanooga Before Dawn

by Freida Theant

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Her fingers are fatigued after hours of gripping the steering wheel; and at intervals, sporting a cigarette that glows like a smoldering spoke. A two-stemmed film of translucence unfurls up and away from the Winston's constant ember as a reminder that it awaits another of her anxiety-tinged kisses. Weary from this night driving, she's been fighting sleep by clouding her GMC Acadia with bored, mechanical churning and singing smoke-blended ballads along with her CD companions Kenny Chesney and Taylor Swift.

The lighted numbers of the dashboard clock claim it's 4:30 A M; fatigue forces Barbara off the lonely blacktop of this rural highway and onto the crunching gravel of the next-to-appear all-night diner in the Smokey Mountains.

She kills the ignition, silences her CD player and slumps down in the predawn stillness. It is quiet like only an Appalachian forest can be. But her right eye is swollen and throbbing, and the marks on her arms and neck are still sensitive to touch.

Barbara, a woman traveling alone, fleeing the violence of an abusive ex-boyfriend, feels vulnerable so she appreciates that the incidental light from the red neon of the diner's road sign and the fluorescent glare from the restaurant illuminate the parking lot and fringe of the encroaching woods. Through her windshield, the parking lot looks haunted; deserted, guarded by two-story pines glaring down on some rusting Chevy pick-up and a dented bass boat perching on its unhitched trailer. The interior of the solitary diner with its brushed chrome walls and scratched Formica tables look safe enough; the shop looks devoid of customers.

She draws warily on the porous filter; even her cigarette threatens, but for an entirely different reason; it's burnt down short so the toke will sting her mouth with a harsh and bitter spat if she pulls too hastily. In fact, the near surface of her face feels its fanned-up heat already. The brilliance of Winston's rejuvenated cherry reveals her slender profile in safety-orange. She spreads her unpainted lips into a sensuous harp to let the super-charged, dense cloud expand cautiously and trickle out slowly in strings and rotating bands that twist in the air, or variously slither out the corners and over the crest of her upper lip. Then she snaps the remaining smoke from view to bathe her inner self with that abrasive mix that burns, yet satisfies. Expelling the spent fumes out in a noisy rush from between her teeth, they form a writhing, tumbling cone, shaped like the hemlocks towering nearby.

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Her brief surveillance proves that she hadn't been followed, so it's worth the risk of ducking in for a coffee and a bite.

As soon as she slips through the restaurant door, odors of fryer oil, overheated coffee, cigarette and pine-scent sanitizer, overwhelm Barbara's sense of smell. She feels her appetite starting up and strides to the booth that gives the best view of her black GMC. Her Air Jordans creak as they catch on the cleaner-and-grease residue coating the tiled-floor. This lanky nineteen year old dresses herself to blend in; relying on her down home look: a cascade of disheveled onyx hair running straight to the collar of her crumpled denim jacket that almost matches her blue jeans. Her Cherokee nose and cheekbones frame dark lashed Oconee eyes that never quit scanning the surroundings even as she saunters past the cash register and red vinyl stools. And in this glare, the deep-colored bruise around her right eye and the incipient swelling are now prominent and no longer obscured by the darkness. Neither are the bruises on her neck.

Before she sidles into the booth a voice up front interrupts, "Honey, why don't y'all set yourself down up here." The solitary waitress emerges from the kitchen and points to the vacant stools.

"But I want to keep an eye on my car."

"Ain't nobody gonna mess with your car, darlin'. Cops an' truck drivers are the only folk about," she chuckles to reassure Barbara.

She studies the waitress with the black plastic name tag that reads "Sue Ellen" in white engraved letters. Her server looks a buxom Grand Ole Opry gal; maybe a "Dolly Parton" in her late thirties, wearing a white ruffled serving apron overlaying a pinkish mauve pleated dress that coordinates with her strawberry blond bouffant.

Barbara rises to sit on a chrome banded red vinyl stool next to the register, "I might as well, since I'm only havin' a coffee and somethin' light."

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The waitress is jolted by the sight of Barbara's discolored eye and black-and-blue marks, but pretends they aren't visible. Instead she clunks the chipped mug over the crinkly paper napkin and sloshes in acrid coffee whose aroma broadcasts its antiquity. Then Barbara points to a clear plastic dome that protects barely recognizable pastries layered with the dried sugar glaze cracking off, "Got a raisin cinnamon?"

Sue Ellen chirps, "Comin' up." She reaches into the display with gummy tongs, rescues a cinnamon Danish and plops it onto a thick porcelain saucer. Sliding it before Barbara, she seats herself at the next stool, and continues to ignore such bruises on her customer, merely asking, "Okay if I join you; I was fixin' to have a cigarette with my coffee."

The midnight traveler nods approval.

The waitress' dishwater-raw fingers pluck a pristine Salem from its partially crumpled green wrapper and press it between her pink glossed lips. Trimmed with frosty pink nails, her hand guides a Bic flame to the edge. During her lengthy pull on the filter, her blue gray eyes focus on the flaming tip as though transfixed by the broadening wafer of fire; consuming the black ring as it burns toward her lips. The smoke streamer shoots up; Sue Ellen spurts out the discard draft as a fluffy jet and draws down hungrily; this time to smoke down her nicotine cravings. She holds the fluid abrasion within her breast for a few minty seconds before thrusting the spent fumes out her nostrils and mouth simultaneously.

Barbara hunches over her plate, and devours stale pastry chased with gulps of burnt coffee. She mumbles through dribbles of crumbs, "Get many people here tonight?"

The waitress reseats the cheerfully streaming Salem within her smile and draws hard, drinking the menthol-nippy fog and cycling it through her nasal chamber and out her nostrils; actually obscuring the lower cigarette with the density of her rolling smoke. Speaking before the last of the exhale had cleared; her words came out wrapped in smoke puffs, "Cops and the truckers are pretty much all you see at this hour."

Barbara shoves her empty saucer aside and dredges out her white-belted red pack from her denim jacket and opens it with pretended nonchalance, seating the first Winston she selects into her pained smile. The sustained pressure of her light up forges the flame into a fiery flux

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with cigarette's leading edge. She drenches her lungs to capacity with the imprisoned fumes until their magic has been absorbed, then she pulses the depleted smoke away through her relaxed jaw. Curling opaque clusters hide her lower face and its dark splotches as they amble out until they flow off, diminishing in the air currents.

The waitress presses her lip stick imprinted Salem back into the split of her grin; cigarette pointing accusingly at the night traveler. Sue Ellen's eyelids widen simultaneously with the blaze of its tip, then relax again while she continues carefully, "Your face looks pretty bad, Honey. Shouldn't you get that looked at by a doctor?"

"Maybe when I get to Chattanooga. How much longer till I get there?" the Cherokee girl extends her cigarette away from the counter over the floor tile and flicks the coffee and nicotine stained mouthpiece with her thumbnail, shucking off a few specks of tightly adhering ash.

"Hour 'n a half." The waitress lowers the extension of ash on her Salem, presses it against the glass wall of the diner's ashtray, upends the mouthpiece and rotates the cigarette, shedding the waste. "That's your home, Chattanooga?"

"Not yet, but I'm fixin' to get a job, there. I know some people...." and lets the pull on her Winston end her sentence. "Is there an all-night gas station nearby?"

"Yep. Nate's Mobil station....another fifteen minutes down this road. It's on the other side of town. Sometimes the night attendant Lonnie's workin' inside the garage and y'all may have to call out for him," and Sue Elle intakes another hit on her Salem. "So if you don't mind my askin' how'd you get that shiner?"

Barbara seats the Winston in the corner of her pressed lips, rises abruptly, "I think I might be bein' followed. If some guy comes in here askin' for some woman who looks like me, ask HIM. He's the one who can tell ya!" She wipes some moisture from the uninjured eye, and shaking slightly, hands over three singles to her server, saying "Gotta go if I'm gonna get to Chattanooga by dawn. I need to get some gas from your friend's fillin' station. Keep the change for yourself." She strides out the glass door leaving a winding trail of smoke curling behind, and slips off into the mountain darkness.

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"You be careful out there tonight, Honey," Sue Ellen calls out. "Lonnie'll fix you right up; just tell him Sue Ellen sent ya." The waitress rings up the sale, takes out her tip, and sits down dejectedly, to finish her Salem. But the quiet lasts for only twenty minutes, broken by the flash of headlights from the parking lot, alerting her to another customer. A gaunt and pinched-faced man in jeans and mossy-break camo-jacket stomps in with his mud-burdened hiking boots. He plops himself at the stool next to the register and growls, "Coffee, black."

As Barbara Ellen pours his cup, he snarls, "Some Cherokee woman come by here tonight, in a black GMC? She's medium height and wearing a jean jacket; long black hair?"

"Yeah, I seen someone like that tonight."

"Yeah? How long ago was that?" he sneered.

"Not long. She said she was headed for the fillin' station on the other side of town. She might still be there," the waitress responds meekly. "If you leave now, y'all might catch her there."

No further prompting was needed; he thrusts a dollar bill on the counter and flies out into the parking lot to disappear in the squeal of spinning tires and a shower of gravel.

Sue Ellen lifts the receiver on the cashier's phone and dials that number she knows by heart, and when the other end picks up, she says "Lonnie? This is Sue Ellen. Y'all get some Cherokee lookin' girl come in just now in a black GMC?"

Fidgeting around, her fingers grasped the pack of Salems blindly while her eyes stayed focused the phone, "She's left already? Good!" Without seeing what she's doing, her fingers instinctively center a Salem in her mouth and flick the lighter to burn in a fresh smoke. Spurting out the white jet joyfully, she continues, "Well guess what? Some guy in a huntin' outfit is followin' her; the one that beat her up. He's the one she's runnin' from. Well, he's on his way to your place right now, lookin' for her."

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Listening to the attendant's reply gives her the time she needs to draw a long satisfying pull on the fresh cigarette and what she hears gladdens the draft, "That's right, y'all know what to do. Get Nate there and y'all stop that car from leavin' the mountains for at least a day. She needs a head start from that 'beater' pretty bad. Didn't y'all use sugar in the gas tank the last time this kind of thing came up?" She whitens the space before her in clouds of satisfaction, "Yeah, thanks Lonnie, I'll see y'all later this mornin' Let me know how this all comes out, hear? Thanks, Lonnie. Bye." With that, she places the receiver in its cradle.