

## **Monkey**

‘I’m not driving all the way to Vegas to steal a monkey,’ I tell her.

‘They’re not monkeys,’ she says. ‘They’re sugar gliders, and they’ll die without her.’

I shake my head, gripping the wheel firmly.

Her hand comes to my shoulder, and she leans close to me. I can smell perfume, and despite myself, I look at her.

‘Please, Papi?’ she says, her eyes wide.

And we both know we are going.

If you’re driving from LA to Nevada, do it in a Cadillac. Okay, so this one isn’t top of the line, but it’d still set you back \$65,000. She’d rented it for us—a surprise.

‘My man deserves a good car to drive,’ she’d said.

I asked her once what she did for a living.

‘I work in hotels,’ she said.

I know what she does, but I pretend not to. She always has money and always needs money.

So, here we are, driving along the freeway, not far from the airport, with LA in all its bright glory laid out alongside us. A sea of golden light. Beside me, she’s on her phone, booking an Airbnb as I don’t want to drive all night.

‘We need to make a stop, Papi. I gotta get set up for the road,’ she says.

So, I pull off, follow her directions. I don't know the city at all. She knows everywhere – she's been everywhere. But I know we're on the edge of Compton, and I tell her we're not driving in.

'No need, Papi,' she says. 'Just a service station. You can get gas too.'

They're weird, petrol stations in the US. You pay before you fill up. So, in she goes while I wait at the pump.

Then there's a man at my elbow, hood up.

'You got any food, mister,' he says.

Beneath the hood, he's all skin and bone—just a few tooth-stumps in his mouth. I shake my head but feel bad as he limps away. And now I'm looking at three men, all hooded too, circling the caddy and staring at the open driver's door. I push it shut. I've never had any trouble filling up in the US, not until now.

I've got the hose locked against the cap, but it's not dispensing. I look towards the teller and see through the glass that he stands in a cage—edge of Compton, like I said. And she must be buying what she needs before paying for the fuel as she's not even in the line.

So I'm watching the three men, stood back a bit now where the forecourt lights cast long shadows, when a one-legged woman in a wheelchair rolls herself between the pumps, laughing. The laughter stops when a car pulls alongside her. The driver begins screaming abuse out of the window.

I'm distracted, wondering what the wheelchair woman did to enrage the driver, and the three men have closed in on me. I go to the front of the car. I can't see their faces, but they're looking at me. Then the pump comes to life, and she's strutting back from the kiosk, all smiles.

The men back away, and she's chatty now, oblivious. I gas up, jump in, pleased to go, but pull up alongside the stump-tooth guy and give him a jar of peanuts I've got stashed in the glovebox. He's happy, and that makes me feel bad too.

She'll talk now. It's the way of it. Growing up in the Philippines, coming to the US as a kid, what her father was like, and her mum in Aurora. Her plans for the future, how she'll go to school. Happy talk.

Back on the freeway, passing an airport sign, I wonder if I should go home. But at home, there are memories, while here there are experiences, and the thought is gone.

We drive on, taillights an endless red river snaking away from us while a golden headlight stream pours past to our left. Away and into the hills, city lights fading, but endless suburbs and towns.

For tonight, she's booked us an apartment in a little slice of Californian paradise that I can't see in the post-midnight dark. She chooses high-quality places. It has a balcony, and we stand outside, smoking a pre-rolled Willie Nelson joint and looking at the palm trees in the courtyard below. We'd bought the joints from a dispensary a few days ago just because I'd wanted to see what a legal weed store looked like

'Don't drop any ash on the tiles,' she says.

She cares about her Airbnb rating. A lot.

She looks sad, and I ask her why.

‘Cos this would be a place to see and we have to leave early tomorrow. I paid extra cos it has a good view.’

‘You knew that, though, right?’ I ask.

‘Yeah,’ she says. ‘I knew.’

‘So let’s not go early,’ I say. ‘I’ll go out, get us breakfast. We’ll sit here and find out what that view is like.’

‘We have to go. First thing. It’s a long drive, and we need to get those sugar gliders.’

‘Whats an extra hour or two?’ I say.

‘I told you, Papi. They’ll die without her.’

She’s in a deep sleep when my phone’s alarm rings. Doesn’t stir when I get up. We don’t have to check out until ten, and I think about letting her see that view. But I know she’ll be unhappy, so I wake her. She can’t talk in the mornings. Moves slow. Won’t look at you.

Once I’m sure she won’t go back to sleep, I leave her, so she can sort things out. She doesn’t like doing it when I’m around.

It’s still dark as we begin to drive, and the chatty head is back. I half-listen, but I’m thinking about something else. We’d driven the Californian coast the week before. All the way north to where pine forests creep down to the edge of the Pacific. Holed up in a cabin she’d rented, we looked at the stars. The night sky was brighter and clearer than I’d ever seen.

‘I guess there’s more stars than you think,’ she’d said.

She would sleep in, and I'd sit out on a raised wooden veranda with its own hot tub. You could glimpse the ocean through the trees. If I were here for a whole summer, I thought, I could write a book. But I didn't write anything.

But now, we are far from the forest, driving through yellow-green farmland. On a dead-straight highway flanked by endless acres of orange groves, only the occasional barn or silhouetted silo breaks the monotony. You could fit every city in Britain along this route.

Amidst the rural emptiness, arising like mirages, towns spring up. There's just time to wonder what life might be like in such vast but remote communities before they are gone, lost in the rear-view mirror.

She's sleeping again now as the farmland gives way to a moonscape of desert hills. Weird, wind-eroded yellow mesas, rounded and twisted. Life's like that: weird.

I met her in Colorado a couple of months ago, queuing in a department store. She was ahead of me in the line but, hearing my accent when I spoke to the cashier, looked back, head to one side, her brown eyes narrowed.

'You're Australian?' she'd said.

I told her I was British.

'They like to party in Britain?' she'd asked.

I didn't know what she meant but said sure, we like to party.

We'd walked out of the store together into a frosty car park with a Rocky Mountain skyline. I expected her to walk away, but instead, she asked if I liked lobster.

I told her I did, but as it was pricey, I rarely had it.

‘I make great lobster,’ she said. ‘You should come over tonight and have some.’

It doesn’t happen. Exotically beautiful girls with golden eye shadow, who look like they might have stepped off the set of a rap video, don’t ask me to dinner.

I took an Uber to the apartment. She met me at the door dressed in nothing but a fur coat that hung down to her knees. As I stepped in, she dropped the coat to the floor— and. I never had the lobster.

As we drive, I look at her sleeping beside me. Her skin, a shade of golden brown. The dark hair curling around her face catches the morning sun and seems to sparkle with gold too.

She awakens as we drive past a sign for Silver City, a ghost town from the silver rush of the eighteen-hundreds. Between craggy sand-yellow hills, I glimpse the rooftop of a saloon and think of westerns and gunfights.

‘You want to visit, Papi?’ she asks.

I nod, and she looks pensive, biting her lip.

‘You know we can’t. The sugar gliders, you know? They’ll die without her. But on the way back, we will, I promise.’

I nod, and the town with its ghosts is just another fading opportunity in the dust behind us.

It is dark when we see the sign for Eerie’s. You can’t miss it. A giant neon billboard. A huge screen. So big you could pile five double-decker busses atop each other and still not reach the top. A lighthouse to guide gamblers. Amongst the screen’s shifting images, one dominates. It

shows photos of an Asian woman clutching hundreds of dollar bills. Announcing to a money-hungry world, she won a million here at Eerie's, best casino outside Las Vegas.

We park, and coming into the casino, I wonder if this is where old gamblers come to die. The carpet is tacky underfoot. Dark woodwork and faded grandeur give the place a nineteen-thirties feel. Amongst the rows of slot machines, I catch sight of a black car with high peaked wings.

The batmobile.

And not just any batmobile. The very one used in Adam West's campy TV show when I was a kid. And suddenly, I'm six years old and can think of nothing better than standing beside the actual, real batmobile.

But we go to find her friend first. She's sat at a bar, all blonde curls and makeup, a silvery cocktail dress stretched over enhanced breasts. Twenty years old, perhaps.

Cassie, she's called, and my girl embraces her, kissing the air to either side of her cheeks with an audible 'mwah!'

And Cassie, reciprocating, grabs her drink from the bar and guides us to a booth. Hands shaking, she tells us about her ex, how he has her money and her pets.

'I don't care about the money, but I need my sugar gliders back. I'm their momma. They need me,' Cassie says, her valley girl accent making every statement sound like a question.

'Don't you worry, hun. My Papi will get them back. No one messes with Papi,' says my girl, leaning into me and smiling proudly.

I wish it was true. Plenty of people mess with me. I don't know who she thinks I am. I'm tall, but no fighter.

Perhaps she will see through me now when we go to get Cassie's little monkey-things from this ex. Her pimp, maybe. Could be that he'll stab me and show definitively how messable I am.

But all I can think of is the batmobile, so I leave the girls to lament and commiserate in turns. Finding my way back to its black glossy chassis, complete with perpendicular exhausts, I pass Eerie's clientele lost in trance-like play at the machines. Most are older, many with meth-twisted faces.

The Batmobile's upright exhausts launched rockets in the TV show. The villains of Gotham were doomed. No one messed with Batman.

We're all in the car now, driving on to Vegas proper. The satnav shows Cassie's old apartment is a mile or two from The Strip, but I drive us along it anyway. All bright lights, multistory posters, sky-high fountains, fortress-like hotels and, of course, casinos – their names and facades known to me from movies.

Donnie and Mari's beaming faces, projected across an entire hotel building, gaze out at me benignly. Are they immortal? They look younger than me but were performing on TV before I was born.

The streets are crowded, party goers and families, old people and young. Strutting between them come two women in bunny outfits, tall as showgirls, handing out cards for an escort service. Prostitution is illegal in the city limits, but ahead of me a pickup tows a mobile billboard offering "girls to your room."



Leaving The Strip behind, we pull up in the dark parking lot of Cassie's old apartment block. My girl reaches into her purse and brings out the black-coloured revolver she keeps there. A sub-compact Sig Sauer P320. I know because I was with her back in Colorado when she bought it in Bass Pro Outdoors.

If there's a heaven, then for me, its entrance won't be pearly gates but Bass Pro's department store shopfront. It sells everything you need for outdoor adventures. Here, you could equip an expedition for the toughest quest. And at the rear of my angelic shop, I'll find doors leading to Eden.

Back in the earthly store, though, I'd looked at the gun counter with the amazement any Brit has when presented with the reality of US gun laws. There were enough guns to start a war. Under the glass, I saw a Walter PPK, and thought of James Bond. I guess the gun laws here are crazy, but the same part of me that loves the Batmobile would buy every gun in the world.

She'd asked the salesman which gun was best. When he told her the P320 was used by the army, she'd chosen it there and then.

'If it's good enough for soldiers, it's good enough for me,' she'd said, before filling out a form and showing some ID.

But now she's holding out the weapon to me.

'You'd better take this, Papi. You know, just in case,' she says.

I take it, thinking, just in case what? Just in case I want to murder the guy? And I'm wondering if Nevada has the death penalty but at the same time thinking how heavy and strong the revolver feels in my hand.

We head up an external staircase, past a mother and son sat smoking weed and playing cards on a landing, and to the ex's apartment door. I have the gun in my jacket pocket. The girls look at me, so I step forwards and knock. Politely. I am British, after all.

My girl stands just behind me, squeezing my arm, and I smell her perfume in the night air.

'You know I love you, don't you, Papi? I'd die without you,' she says.

And again, I think about going home.

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