

# Long Cold Day

by Elizabeth Bear

Remarkably, Christian Whittaker went to bed sober one cold Wednesday night, the last day of February, in 1976. Whittaker was a big, blunt man, broken-veined, with a habitual drunk's coarseness of skin and voice. He wasn't astoundingly fat, but he had an astounding *ring* of fat around his neck: jowls and a double chin that fell over his throat and collar and two thick cushions on either side of his spine below his ears, like the hams on a hog. He wore a wedding ring because his hands were spongy with retained fluid; he could never take it off.

Whittaker shuffled along Maple Street, careless of meltwater rivulets frozen across the sidewalk. Clouds snagged like handfuls of cotton wool on the mountains bounding a vast, torn, oceanic sky. White on white on gray, snowcapped peaks sweeping down to snow-frosted foothills that cupped a low, cold valley.

His gloves were old; his hands were shoved into his pockets against the cold. There was a hole in the thumb of the right-hand one. He idly rasped the hair on his leg against the skin with his thumb as he walked. His legs burned with wind through the cloth of his jeans.

He was drunk. Not *very* drunk, not by Whittaker's standards, but enough that the cold didn't hurt as much as it should have. He saw a woman walk past, though, headed in the other direction, her child walking in front of her. The little boy's coat was threadbare corduroy, not warm enough for the iron of the day, and his mother had cupped her blue naked fingers over his ears.

Whittaker turned his head inside its ox-collar of flesh to watch them pass. The woman ducked her chin and wouldn't meet his eyes, her shoulders hunched toward her ears with cold or fear.

Whittaker thought of his own boy, Tony. He thought of Tony shivering in an apartment that went unheated half the time, and he stopped on the sidewalk, his hands knotting in his pockets. Cold. It was always cold; he couldn't remember when he'd last seen a buttercup edging between sidewalk slabs or flicked the head off a dandelion with his thumbnail. He half-thought those things were fantasies, childhood fancies carried through to adulthood—the Easter bunny, Santa Claus.

But the warmth had to come and go, didn't it? Warmth enough to melt the snow where it lay against the earth, so it slumped in curves and hollows and sent trickles of meltwater across the sidewalks to freeze in treacherous ridges. Warmth enough to

drip icicles from eaves like accelerated stop-motion stalactites.

Whittaker wished he could remember the last time he'd seen the sun. He turned around his left foot, not a smooth pivot but a stumping spiral, and stared up at the mountains, the clouds bunched and tangled around their peaks. He shivered in his too-small coat.

Tony would be cold. Even colder. Whittaker ducked his head as he faced into the wind; it sheared into his sinuses like glass. His boots were scuffed, almost scoured across the toes. Fractal salt stains spidered up the leather like frost-flowers, grasping at his cuffs.

A white coupe sat by the curb, engine running. Long piratical plumes of exhaust curled from the tailpipe, whipped forward by the same wind that was suffocating Whittaker. He contemplated stealing the car, driving it home, piling Jessica into the passenger seat and Tony in back, and driving until they reached someplace warm. He could hear her voice, almost, if he listened for it. *Go ahead, Chris. Do what you have to do.*

He heard things sometimes. He was used to it.

He waded through plowed snow to the car and pulled his gloved hand from his pocket. It took concentration to uncurl the fist. His entire body wanted to clench, tendon by tendon, bone by bone. He reached for the handle of the passenger-side door, the door against the curb. Chrome shocked through his gloves; when he snatched his hand back his fingers caught, ice cracked off the handle, and the door swung open. The plow had scuffed snow into ice, big yellow-black chunks, and the door thumped solidly when it struck the smut-marked bank.

It was warm in the car. Cigarette-scented air puffed past him, easing the ache in his sinuses, a breeze from a summer day. Whittaker bent forward, grunting, hands on his knees and then on the seat as he shoved his bulk inside, reaching out to brush the keys with a fingertip. He crawled across the passenger seat, a yellow patchwork quilt bunching under his knee, his pants riding up his calf and allowing an arctic gust to caress gooseflesh.

He didn't fit. The dashboard shoved against his hip. The stick shift jabbed his thigh. He should have gone to the driver's side. He shouldn't be here at all.

"*Hey!*" The first cry tattered, but the second one strong. "*Hey, you son of a bitch. Hey!*"

Whittaker flinched, shoved backward, boot slipping on rilled ice. He bruised hip and elbow, shoulder and ass, on the doorframe while wriggling loose. He didn't fall, but he slipped, twisted, wrenching his knee. Something tangled his legs; his hands clenched in fear as he clawed at it. He didn't turn, didn't glance over his shoulder to

see who had shouted.

Heaving, arms pumping, whatever was in his hand flapping behind him like Batman's cape, Whittaker ran. His knees stabbed and his ankles twanged, every step resonating through his body like a beating. He ducked down an alley, air scalding his throat as he gasped in huge, painful breaths. He fetched up inside an empty bus shelter three blocks away, slumped against splintered wood, snot and phlegm gliding from his nose to crackle on the sidewalk. Crimson flashes haunted the black tunnel closing over his vision; his heart pounded so hard it shook his hands in time. He heard the bus coming and couldn't look up.

With his free hand he fumbled in his pocket for change, fingers numb through worn leather. The driver knelt the city bus with a sizzle of hydraulics. Whittaker hauled himself up the steps, panting, the sweat freezing on his neck. He paid and started coughing before he even managed to drop into one of the handicapped benches at the front. He doubled over until his belly pressed his thighs, coughing until it felt like his lungs were rasped pink.

His fingers clenched on cloth, warmth, softness through his glove. He looked down. There was a yellow quilt—a quarter-sized quilt, a child's quilt—clenched in his left hand.

Whittaker was nearly at the end of the bus route when he realized that the home he was going to didn't exist anymore and when he remembered that Jessica was dying—on the sharp verge of dying, nothing left of her but an unconscious shell on a plastic hospital pillow—and Tony hadn't spoken to him in seven years.

The bus was going the wrong way, anyway.

. . . . .

Gretchen and Tamara were shooting pool and drinking tequila mockingbirds in a bar called the Golden Eagle when Tony Whittaker blew in out of the dark. Every time the wooden door opened, its watered-glass panel shook in the wind and the swampish interior of the tavern cooled enough to offer some relief. A mediocre blues quartet was ruining "Hellhound on my Trail" and Miller High Life was the most upscale beer the tavern served.

Tony sidled through the door into warmth, packed bodies, and noise. His bell-bottoms flapped around his boots and bubbled paint flaked onto his fingers. He unzipped his coat, let it swing open so the music and moist warmth could slip inside, then pulled steamed glasses off his nose and polished them on his pullover.

Gretchen had the keener sense of smell. Tamara saw the lean line of her sister's body tighten when Tony's scent curled past her. She followed the lift of Gretchen's chin, the sideways angle of her green-hazel eyes. *Prey*, the look said.

Tamara lifted her pool cue to make a right angle with the floor and straightened her spine. **him**, Gretchen said. **he has moved what was not meant to be moved. he has intersected the angles with the curve. he is here, as it was said he would be.**

**well, he's ugly enough**, Tamara answered. **is he full of juice?**

**mmm, yes.** Gretchen laughed silently, a nodding grin that showed her canines. She squared her shoulders—the shoulders of her sickly, curvaceous alien body—and tilted her beer against her lips. They left a red print on the rim as she drained it. **and a good thing, because i am thirsty and the gate-keeper awaits**

**the gate and the key**

**the cold and the snow**

**take him**, Tamara said. **take him and make us strong. open the way for the master, for the sisters**

**that all may feast.** Gretchen set her empty bottle aside. **i'll go and see if he shoots pool.** Her lips pursed into a smile as she watched Tony Whittaker belly up to the bar and order a Bud Lite and a bourbon, a boilermaker. Gretchen followed his scent through the press of bodies, shivering away from the curved human flesh that brushed the envelope she wore. Their presence was prickly-uncomfortable, squelchy-soft, even more unpleasant to brush her fringes than to be tangled in. She gritted her palps and kept going, yearning back to the comfortable precise angles of the pool table, her sister, her home. And of her master, the terrible voluptuous form, the unholy curves and arcs of his presence.

She would serve.

And then she would be permitted to feed, and go home.

When Tony Whittaker turned to face the young woman who jostled his elbow, he drew a single sharp nervous breath. She seemed oblivious to his presence until then, as if the gasp caught her attention, and she looked up and smiled.

The woman's golden brown hair was streaked pale and curled in little feathers around her cheekbones and jaw. She was small, slight to boniness, her little titties poking sharp triangles through her sweater and her jeans slung off hip bones you could cut yourself on. Her elbows and knees and shoulder blades were all angles,

and her eyes—green and amber in the light over the bar—were luminescent, huge. Some trick of the dimness made her pupils look weird, lens-shaped like an alligator's.

"Can I buy you a drink?" he said, before he consciously formed the words in his head. He fumbled the antique watch in his pocket, the texture of its faceted etchings warm under the pad of his thumb. He flicked the stem with his nail, just to be sure—a bad habit. It wasn't ticking. He pulled his hand away.

She laid a fine-boned hand on the suede of his jacket sleeve, blurring the nap. "Sure," she said. Her voice seemed to come from a great distance. She smiled. "Do you shoot pool?"

. . . . .

The crowd on the bus thinned by ones and twos, oppressive flesh-scented warmth giving way to a drafty chill, until Whittaker was the last passenger. The driver made him get off at the end of the line. "Sorry, man. I'm going back to the depot. Rules. There's a 10:45 inbound if you wait at the bus shelter."

Whittaker paused at the top of the steps, the yellow quilt wadded up in his hand. The floor was angled by the bus's hydraulics to bring the bottom step close to the curb. "What time is it now?"

The bus driver touched the brim of her hat. She had a kind cast of feature; Whittaker thought it was a little like Jessica's, although he couldn't really remember what Jessica looked like. "About 9:30. There's a bar over there you can wait at." She gestured, a poke of her nibbled finger, and Whittaker followed the arc of it to a neon sign advertising the Golden Eagle Tavern. A barnlike structure loomed on the far side of the parking lot, motorcycles and pickup trucks huddled around its feet. Whittaker glanced over his shoulder, caught the bus driver's eye. A disturbing suggestion of feathered motion rippled the shadows behind her, but Whittaker shrugged it off. He was used to seeing things that weren't quite there.

"10:45?"

"Cross my heart." The bus driver made the gesture with her gnawed-on thumbnail, and Whittaker shrugged and started down the steps, ducking his chin behind his collar. He leaned on the wind to get across the parking lot. He didn't hear the bus pull away, but when he glanced over his shoulder, it was gone.

Inside, he met raucous noise and close-packed bodies. He paused inside the door, steaming in his black coat, the quilt wadded incongruously in his hand. The

atmosphere felt thick and airless all at once. He gasped in the sudden heat.

Tony didn't see Whittaker come in and wouldn't have recognized him unless he got a good look at his face. It had been that long—and anyway Tony was bent over the red felt of the pool table, the cue slipping between his knuckles like a dog's wet tongue. Tamara leaned a hip against the table beside him, distracting him with glimpses of a soft oval belly button when the edge of her shirt rode up.

Tony broke. Balls scattered, ringing off each other with crisp staccato thumps. The two-ball, the four-ball, sank. He grinned and settled back on his heels. "Solids," he said.

"Good luck," Gretchen said and bumped him with her shoulder as she stepped up. "I'd rather play you than Tamara." He swatted her playfully; she ducked away, but he didn't miss Tamara's grin.

He did miss the third shot. And stood by, amazed, as Tamara sank eight balls in a row, almost without hesitation. The economy of her motion struck him most, the elegant way her bony body angled and unleashed. *Snakes*, he thought, but snakes wasn't quite right—snakes were all curves, and she was all points.

"Damn," he said. "I'm glad we weren't playing for stakes."

"We weren't?" she said. "Anyway, it's only geometry."

Gretchen dropped quarters in the slot to retrieve the billiard balls. She racked them with a decisive rattle and lifted the rack with a flourish.

"Tamara?"

"Oh," Tamara said, "let Tony play. I'm going to powder my nose." She gave Tony a squeeze and slipped away.

Gretchen smiled at him, showing teeth. "So," she said. "You want to break?" **he's hooked, sister.**

**i'm hungry, sister. can we hurry this?**

**yes. i want to go home.**

**home**, Tamara agreed, with longing. She shuffled through the crowd, trying not to brush up against too many of the slimy-soft, grub-squirmy humans. The restroom was crowded with females fixing their makeup and inhaling narcotics. She didn't blame them for wanting to distance themselves from their flesh. Raw, greasy flesh. Meat for worms.

She waited impatiently and took her turn in the stall, the cold hardness comforting. Straight hard stall, right angles and parallel lines. Sloppy, of course, but the closest a creature of meat could manage.

At least they tried.

She washed her hands under cold water and dried them under hot air, eavesdropping throughout on Gretchen's conversation with the boring human. The boring dangerous human, she reminded herself. The boring *dangerous* human with the power of ice and winter and frozen timelessness at his command. If she wanted to go home, she should be careful to remember that, that this sharp-scented, bulbous, curvilinear creature was capable of stopping time in its tracks, of offending the master enough that he had sent her and her sister to make redress.

They would need to not only destroy the prey but also discover how he had done what he had done and reverse it.

**i want to go home**, she whined, or maybe it was Gretchen. They weren't all that different, one Hound from another.

She decided to pass by the bar on the way back to the pool table. She was thirsty, and she knew Gretchen would be too. They were always thirsty, these bodies. Always hungry. Always craving, needing, desiring. And not simple desires, simple needs—home, the den, the orderly confluence and linear evolution of timestreams. No, strange, needy hungers.

Such hungry meat.

She pushed up to the bar next to a fat man in a damp black coat who clutched a magic blanket in his hand and ordered beer for both herself and Gretchen and another boilermaker for the prey. She pushed a crumpled ten dollar bill across the counter and was waiting for change when the scent underlying the filth and alcohol saturating the man next to her caught her attention.

**gretchen**, she said. **i think someone has come for our prey. we should be leaving soon.**

Whittaker had decided not to wait for the bus. He had enough money in his pocket for a couple of drinks, and he thought he could call somebody—get a ride—something. He'd figure out who to call when he'd had a drink. Or two.

He didn't want to go back out into the cold.

He collected his scotch and water and turned around to look for a place to sit. He wanted to be at the bar, but all the stools were taken, and the press of bodies against

his bulk made it hard to breathe. He noticed the skinny girl who brushed past him with three bottles of beer in her right hand and a bourbon balanced in the left; he watched her path through the crowd. And he almost dropped his drink when he saw where she was heading and who was waiting for her there.

Gretchen, Tony thought, was even more dangerous than Tamara. It seemed almost as if she only had to look at the balls to sink them. She'd beaten him three games running by the time Tamara returned with the drinks, and he was glad enough to give up his place at the table.

"Look," Tamara said as she dropped a beer and a bourbon he hadn't asked for into his hands. Cold sweat wicked between his fingers. The bottle was slick. He held it tight. "It's crowded here, and the band sucks. Why don't you come back to our place, Tony? We've got beer and weed. We can play cards or whatever."

He blinked and looked from one of them to the other. Gretchen, head thrown back, was draining her beer. Her tongue darted inside the neck to capture the last few droplets. Tony tasted his beer to hide his shaking hands. He wondered how she stayed so skinny when she drank like that. "Your place?"

"Sure," Gretchen said, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. "Why not?"

Damn, Tony thought. Sisters. "Sure," he said. He knocked back his bourbon and set the shot glass on the rail beside the pool tables. "That'd be great."

"Great," Tamara said. "You got a car?"

As he slid his right hand into his jacket pocket, fondling the stem of the pocket watch, Tony wondered if maybe this was a sign, if maybe his luck had finally changed. "Sure," he said, and finished his beer before he led them toward the door.

Whittaker's first reaction when he caught sight of his son was to vanish into the shadows, to hide himself. But then he thought that Tony could buy him a drink, or if he wouldn't do that, could at least give him a ride home. But by the time he'd thought of it, Tony was leaving, marching for the door with a skinny girl on each arm.

Whittaker gulped his drink and stumbled forward, ignoring the grumbles from those he plowed aside. "Sorry," he said. "Excuse me. I'm sorry—"

"Fat fuck," they answered, when they answered at all, or they laughed at the yellow blanket thrown over his arm. What the hell was he doing with the blanket, anyway? Why hadn't he gotten rid of it?

He held it tight and shoved through the crowd.

"Tony!" he yelled, but the band was loud and Tony was already at the door. One of



the girls turned over her shoulder to look at Whittaker, and Whittaker tripped and almost fell, because, for a moment—as if a mask slipped—the face that regarded him wasn't human.

It wasn't even exactly a face. The eyes were huge, green-gold, afire in a tangle of angles and lines like a child's magic-marker scribble. A dense thicket of daggy teeth seemed to grind and gnash in a jagged-dewlipped maw, and the hand that rested on Tony's arm blurred into a talon.

Whittaker was used to seeing things that weren't there. Even so, this one sent him a startled step backward, blinking his eyes against the sting of cigarettes. The *thing* smiled at him and, with a solicitous stroke of its hand, ushered Tony outside, into the night and the cold.

The cold hit Tony across the face hard enough to make him flinch. He shivered, muscles locking tight enough to hurt, his right hand knotting on the watch and his left just curling hard into itself, fingernails marking his palm. "It's over there," he said, nodding in the direction of a baby blue AMC Concord hard-top parked much farther across the tarmac than he really wanted to walk. Tamara and Gretchen had no hesitations, though. They each took one of his elbows and led him forward, the sanded ice rough and slick under his boots. "Where do you girls live?" he asked through chattering teeth.

"Don't worry," Gretchen said. "We'll show you."

"So, Tony," Tamara said, "is there anything you'd change, if you could?"

"Change?"

"Sure." She paused. "Like if you had a time machine. And you could go back and change something. What would it be?"

He stiffened, his hand tightening. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged against his arm. "Like I'd do high school over. And get better grades, and go to college. Like that."

"Oh," he said, and swallowed, and forced himself to let go of the watch. There was no way they could know, no way they could have known.

"I'd stop my mom dying," he said. "I'd stop her getting sick. They say she could go any day now." He swallowed, and said it again, to himself. "Any day. Tomorrow, even. March, anyway. She'll die in March."

Gretchen petted his arm as they came up beside his car. He disengaged from each of them in turn and began to dig for his keys. "Shouldn't you be with your mom?"

Tamara asked.

Tony closed his eyes for a second. It was the cold making them sting. "She won't die tonight."

"Is that why you did it, Tony?" Gretchen asked. The girls stepped back, giving him room to open the door.

"Why I did what?"

He heard footsteps coming toward them across the lot, heavy and hurried, and started to turn. The keys rattled in his hand.

"Why you made it be always winter," Tamara said. Tony barely heard her.

He was too busy staring his father in the eye.

"Tony," Christian Whittaker said, and held out a hand. His voice was very calm, level and serious, not the bellowing voice of the old drunk Tony had feared and hated. But his breath reeked of booze, and Tony stepped back, away from his father. Away from the girls who weren't girls.

Whittaker felt it like a punch in the belly. The girls puffed up like they'd show fangs and claws any second now. He pushed forward, though, even as Tony fell back against his car.

"Tony—"

"No," Tony said. He turned to one of the girls. "*What* did you just say?"

Her eyes caught the light and flashed orange-yellow for an instant. "Is that why you made it be always winter? So you wouldn't have to watch her die? How did you do it, Tony?"

She seemed larger, suddenly, and no longer looked so much like a skinny girl, all angles and no curves.

"Shit," Tony said. His hand jabbed for his pocket, came up clutching something. He looked toward Tamara, who had fallen two more steps back and now settled on her haunches, her spiky jaws dripping slaver. "Shit, that's like a Great Dane or something."

But the light shone through its tangled form. The other one came up beside it, circling wide around Whittaker and Tony, backing them both against the car. **thirsty**, the first one said as it crouched down, whining, and licked its knotwork paws. Whittaker and Tony heard it, a thick, hollow echo in their skulls.

**home**, the second answered. **don't fight. it will only hurt more.**

"Fuck that," Tony said, fumbling with the thing in his hand.

Whittaker could see it now; it was Tony's grandfather's antique pocket watch, and he was trying to pry off the back of it, the curved panel with the thumb-latch that hid a sort of locket. Whittaker stepped in front of his son.

"Never mind that," he said. "Just—whatever they want. Give it to them."

"They want me," Tony said. Whittaker couldn't spare him a glance; he had no attention for anything but the two weird hounds that started toward them, their lean giant bodies rib-sprung and gaunt, hesitant as stalking cats. "They just want—"

**give us the timekeeper**, one hound said.

"Give them the watch," Whittaker said. He pointed with the hand that didn't hold the patchwork quilt and waited for Tony to hand over the timepiece.

"They don't want the watch," Tony said.

**give us the timekeeper and we leave as we came.** The second hound crouched, ready to spring. Hopelessly, Whittaker swung the baby blanket at it, as if he were shooing flies.

The hound leaped backward with a startled, angry yip; Whittaker looked down at the yellow patchwork quilt in surprise.

"Magic," Tony said as if it weren't completely ridiculous.

Well, it wasn't as if anything had made any sense at all since the bus driver. Earlier than that, really—since he'd decided to steal the car.

Whittaker turned his back on the hounds and threw the blanket over Tony's head. "Crouch down," he hissed in the voice of a father. "Don't move."

And Tony, blessedly, dropped to his haunches against the door of the car and froze there, his whole body covered under the small blanket, its corners just brushing the ground.

The first hound snarled, and the second hound howled. They threw themselves at Tony, knocking Whittaker aside as if he was of no interest, as if he wasn't there at all. Slavering, snapping, they touched the blanket and slid away from it like eggs off Teflon. Whittaker hit the ground hard, banging his bruised hip and skinning the heels of his hands. He hadn't gotten his gloves on; his palms burned on ice and salt.

"Hey," he yelled, pushing himself to his knees. "Hey, you bitches! Over here!"

They paid him no heed. They lunged and clambered over one another, struggling to reach Tony, and they failed. Whittaker held his breath. He crawled forward, tearing the knee of his trousers. The hounds shoved him aside, long, strange claws scoring his arm and hand, leaving bleeding scratches.

Tony, hunched, shivering, was wise enough not to raise his head. He huddled, sagging to knees and elbows, curling tight until the shape under the blanket was more turtle than man. Whittaker could hear him breathing, long, shivering sobs, even over the snarling of the hounds. They lunged again, and again they failed.

"Take me," Whittaker said. He got to his feet, hauled himself up with a grip on the fender. Blood froze his hand to angled metal. He ripped it loose. "Damn you, take me!"

The hounds fell back. They circled and whined. One edged forward, great parched pads splayed on the asphalt, and nosed Whittaker's hand, brushed his flesh with its teeth.

**we never tire, she said. we never fail.**

"You leave my boy be." He couldn't straighten. His lungs hurt. His chest locked. He staggered forward, doubled up, braced his bloody hands on his thighs.

—**master**—

—**home**—

—**he is the gate and the key**—

**we cannot go home, they both said at once. we thirst. there is no home for us until he is punished. perished.**

"Punish me."

**we serve. you will not serve. the master will not be pleased.**

"Whatever," Whittaker said, and somehow found the strength to draw himself up. "He is mine. My blood." Inspiration struck him; he wasn't sure why. "I have the prior claim."

The hounds whined. They slunk. They wagged their bony tails and pricked their angled ears, all lines and points.

**we cannot go home**, one said, and **thirsty**, said the other.

"Go," Whittaker said, and pointed with a bloody hand.

They met his eyes with their flaming eyes, stern and merciless. He stepped forward. Under the blanket, Tony cringed.

The right-hand hound looked down first. She backed a step, tail falling. Her sister snarled. **we do not forget**, she said, and glared again before she turned to follow her sister.

Whining, cringing, glancing over their shoulders, they went. They tumbled over one another, leaving. Whittaker saw them grow taller and straighter, young women instead of hounds, their clothes hanging off their lean, uncomfortable forms as they supported each other away. One was weeping; the other walked grimly, hunched, holding her sister erect.

Whittaker felt, almost, pity. Tony hunched tighter and didn't lift his head.

Whittaker closed his eyes.

Silence followed, long silence, while Whittaker held his breath. His chest burned when he breathed in, finally, and then burned more with the cold. Tony cursed, and Whittaker forced himself, a quarter-inch at a time, to uncurl his fingers and then open his eyes. Tears had frozen his lashes together; he had to rub them free.

Tony had pushed the blanket off his head and was scrabbling in the ice on the parking lot, trying to find his keys. His fingers closed on something. He yelped in triumph, and looked up and met Whittaker's eyes. "Shit," he said, and stood. He caught the blanket as it fell, despite holding the pocket watch in one hand and the keys in the other, and handed it to Whittaker.

Whittaker took it and folded it over his arm. "It's stolen," he said helplessly.

"I should have known." Tony made a motion to stuff the watch back into his pants. Whittaker stopped him, hand on his arm, blood on his sleeve. Tony didn't quite flinch away, but Whittaker could feel him master it.

Whittaker swallowed and asked anyway. "What's in there?"

It was easy to open, when you weren't shaking. Wordlessly, Tony showed him the photograph of Jessica that Whittaker had anticipated, all ironed brown hair and hands like birds.

"It was my fault," Whittaker said. "If I had paid attention—if I had gotten her to a

doctor—"

"You think I don't know that?" Tony ran his thumb across the stem of the watch. "You think it makes anything better?"

"No," Whittaker said. "But I do miss her, too."

"Have you been to see her?"

Whittaker shook his head. No. No, but he could imagine her. Eaten out from the inside, still breathing, but dead and dry as a cicada's shell.

Without looking up, Tony pressed down on the stem. Whittaker heard the click. He closed his eyes and felt something rebound, sharp as a wound spring snapping. He opened them and found Tony staring him in the face.

"Well," Whittaker said. "I should be going—"

"Dad, come home with me. We'll go to the hospital in the morning." All of a sudden, all on a breath, like Tony had to get it out fast if he was going to get it out at all.

Whittaker sighed. He pulled a hand out of his pocket and rubbed the palm across his greasy skull. "I'm a drunk, son."

Tony shrugged. "Drink tomorrow. Come home with me tonight. I've got room."

"Tomorrow?" Whittaker said, just to see if he could get Tony to grin. "What's that?"

"We'll find out when it gets here," Tony answered, and unlocked the door of the car.

Christian Whittaker went to bed sober that Wednesday night. And Thursday arrived in the morning, driven before a line of spring thunderstorms.

The End

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