



TEN
BUCKS

JAMES SLATER

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A Short Story
By JAMES SLATER

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THE SLEET STUNG. I traversed the ridge and dropped in the the windless powder bowl beneath me. British Columbia's Whistler mountain was heaven this time of year, and I was floating on a piece of it. Every move was precise. It had to be. Every turn, rise and dip calculated and carefully executed. This frozen corner of the world offered a perfect backdrop for the grace and beauty of skiing, with a warm layer of brightly colored fabric technology making the extreme altitude and temperature bearable. Enjoyable even. Behind the orange fence to the right, I could make out what I knew to be the roar of an appreciative crowd. It was perfect. Except for one thing.

The damn phone.

There it was again. Insistent. Constant now. Annoying.

I opened my eyes. Half in and half out of sleep, I realized the phone wouldn't answer itself. The ceiling in my basement room was only a few feet above me, and I knew even if I wanted to now, I couldn't get that dream back. I'd tried before, and it just didn't work that way. I let it ring another couple of times, just for spite. It was either the seventh or tenth ring that I finally gave in and picked up the phone on the blue metal desk next to the bed.

"Hello?" I offered, the ski sleep betraying my actual state.

"Doug? Did I wake you up?"

"No," I lied. She knew I was lying too.

"I can call back later. Sorry."

Lisa has this insane habit of calling me Douglas, sir Doug, and sometimes even Mr. Douglas, should she be rightly annoyed with me. But it was just plain Doug this morning. Something was up.

"It's fine Lisa. I was just in the bathroom," I lied again. "I've been up for hours." I hit myself in the head with my palm. Why in the hell did I even answer the phone? She knew I was lying about being up and the last thing she needed was to picture me in the bathroom. What the hell was the matter with me? I didn't trust myself before noon, so shouldn't expect anyone else to, either.

"Nice day out, huh? You should have stayed in bed."

She had no idea how right she was about that.

"Right," I agreed, taking a step and lifting the curtain, or what served as a curtain to the outside world, and did a visual on the weather

condition. I shouldn't have bothered. My low angle through the basement window was an odd one due to the basement's actual below-ground location, and it gave me a crappy view of the street, but a decent view of the top of the tan house across the street and the sky above it. It was a typical non-summer day in typical pacific northwest fashion. The sky was gray, and the rain was drizzling. Like always. When the wet season descends on this part of the country, dawn and dusk look pretty much the same. Perpetual dusk. It's consistent and depressing.

Lisa, of course, had been up for hours, and that was no lie. By this time she'd have devoured the newspaper, breakfast and whatever else she could set her mind to. She wanted to look at a new car up north, and lucky me, I was her guide. At least that's what she was asking me. It wasn't really in my plans. I wanted breakfast, a read of the paper myself and then a decidedly non-athletic afternoon watching the overpaid apes from Los Angeles get their asses handed to them by some other overpaid apes from Dallas. It was a good plan.

The shower finalized it. Coffee, newsprint and football were about all I could handle today. I just had to figure out a way to break the news to Lisa.

* * *

An hour later I sat in the passenger seat of Lisa's '62 Rambler. The heater was out and the wipers were marginal. We were cold and damp, and a new car wasn't really an option now, I realized, but a requirement. Plus, the Rambler wasn't even really a car. It was a old folks vehicle manufactured for going slow and taking grandkids out for ice cream. Plus, new was a relative term. Lisa wasn't a grandmother; she was the granddaughter who, presumably, had gone out for ice cream and at some point, inherited the relic, an automotive hand-me-down whose design came from the 1950's. This was 1982. The girl needed some decent wheels.

We were headed north on Aurora avenue. At one time in Seattle's not-so-distant past, this thoroughway followed what were originally native American and wagon trails to form the Pacific highway, then State Route 99 that ran from Canada to San Diego. It was magnificent until

Interstate I-5 came along, about the same time, I guessed, as the Rambler had. Left now were second rate hotels, whores, drugs, stoplights, and, of course, used car lots. Lots. Enough that some called this stretch used car heaven. I didn't. Aurora Avenue north was just too ugly a place to spend an eternity, even for a used car.

It didn't seem to bug Lisa near as much as it did me. She was a princess in a ski jacket and jeans, big brown eyes that smiled even when she didn't. We rambled north, and I wondered how the old car even managed to hold itself together. The poor thing should have been given its last rites years and thousands of miles before. I figured Lisa loved her classic conveyance as much as her actual grandmother, and I could understand that. Its steering worked on the same principal as that of a battleship, but I didn't say anything. I knew it was a sensitive issue, one that she alone had to come to terms with. Nonetheless, I stood by what I thought, even if I didn't say it in front of her. The girl *did* need wheels.

The address was off 175th Avenue, some place called Olympic View Drive, but 175th was blocked for construction or repair. We hung a left on 180th and followed it west, but the addresses and streets weren't linking up. I'm usually pretty good about being a passenger and not a second driver, but finally I had to say something.

"Lisa, it's not that I doubt your sense of direction, but I don't see anywhere here that looks even remotely like Olympic View Drive."

She rolled her eyes at me like she does. She'd already reached the same conclusion.

"Well, what do you suggest, Mr. Douglas?"

"Gas Station?" I ventured. It seemed odd, me, the man in our duo to be the one suggesting that we stop and ask for directions, but I thought with a bit of luck I might still salvage a part of my planned activities for the day. I'd done a quick check on the game that was a few minutes in, but the ancient AM radio was only about as effective as the car's heater. I'd flipped in on and then off a few minutes later in frustration.

Lisa relented fairly easily.

"Right, one friendly neighborhood gas station coming right up."

She circled back to Aurora and found a Texaco station, a brand new one with digital readouts on its pumps and a sparkling sign that looked like it got polished at least three times a day. Lisa pulled up next to the

cashier and found he wasn't too busy. High school kid in coveralls, cigarette in one corner of his mouth, one eye on Lisa's relic, the other on the Sony behind the register broadcasting the game.

"Hey there," she called, "Can you tell me where I can find Olympic View Drive."

The kid didn't drop the cigarette as he replied out of the other corner of his mouth.

"Nope. Never heard of it." Then he smiled. "Fill up your *tank*?"

Lisa abided sarcasm, but only from those she knew well. The punk kid wasn't anything of the kind and slamming her family relic wasn't polite conversation in her world. Her eyes narrowed.

She turned to me. "We do need gas. How much is it here?" she asked.

I glanced at the nearest pump and read from the orange digits. "Buck thirty-five."

She considered not even for a second.

"Never mind. I wouldn't get it here if it were free."

I had a sudden thought as she put the car in reverse. I hoisted my head through the passenger-side window.

"What's the score?" I yelled at the cashier.

He didn't even look up. "Dallas by ten" I heard him say before Lisa's foot took us out of the station and back out to Aurora in search of a station with cheaper gas, better directions and less sarcasm.

Lisa's eyes were on the road but her mind was stuck at the Texaco.

"He was so rude!"

I smiled. "He was funny."

"He was not. He laughed at my car." She was pouting. "It is *not* a tank."

"Lisa, everyone laughs at this car. If you continue to drive it, you've got to expect a fair amount of abuse. You've got to lighten up a bit."

She looked at me accusingly. "I don't know why you always take sides against me."

"I don't always take sides against you. I'd probably have said the same thing if I'd thought of it in time. Plus," I said with a wink, "if I didn't argue with you, we'd never have anything to talk about, would we?"

"I think I'd like that better." She wasn't looking at me, but at the road

ahead.

Maybe she would at that.

Today was the first I'd heard from her in more than two weeks. We had a heated discussion on witchcraft, and I thought it was a joke, but she took it seriously. It scared her to death, and she told me to go to hell. Of course, she was immediately sorry, but hadn't talked to me until today. The corner of her mouth was beginning to twitch, however, and I detected her whimsey in a second.

"I talked to Todd yesterday," I told her, steering the conversation back into the tolerance zone.

Her expression changed in a flash. "I haven't heard from him in weeks. Where is he?" she asked, intrigued.

"Mexico."

"Mexico? Why on earth would he go to Mexico?"

"Said he couldn't stand the rain. Can't say as I blame him."

"By himself?"

"Lisa, Todd's a big boy now and can go to Mexico if he likes."

"Doug, just tell me."

There it was again. When she really wanted to know something, my name was Doug. Doug this and Doug that. Not Sir Douglas, Meester Douglas or "Doug-ass." But she had a way of knowing when I was holding something back. I'd have done the same in her place. One day Todd was there, the next he wasn't. So I told her.

"OK. He went south with Anita."

"I knew he was a sucker for love." As she said the word, *love*, she looked up with a dreamy look on her face. I knew that look. Knights on white horses and shining armor. All well and good for a ski jacket princess, but knights are rare, horses are a pain in the ass, and I don't know from personal experience, but I'm betting keeping armor shiny is a hell of a job that leaves little time for secret crushes who drive Ramblers.

"It's not like that at all. Mexico is having trouble with her southern neighbor with border skirmishes over the past few weeks. I don't know if you know this or not, but Anita's father is a senior officer in the Mexican army. Todd's volunteered to fight for her country. Kind of gets you right there, doesn't it?" I said, pounding my fist into my chest.

She looked startled. “I knew he worked in the Mexican government. I had no idea he was a general.”

Then she wised up as I smiled. I couldn’t contain myself.

“OK. You’re right,” I told her. “He’s not a general. Border skirmishes? Not in recent months, anyway. But he is a diplomat, and now he’s a rich diplomat. They discovered oil on some of his family lands, and they’re in negotiations now with Pemex doing the ground work.”

“Pemex?” she asked doubtfully, wondering where my fairly tale ended and where Todd’s true story began.

“Big Mexican oil company. He’s offered Todd a job to help him with this new project.”

She had a one-track mind. “When do they tie the knot?”

In truth, I didn’t know. I presumed the marriage proposal and job offer went hand-in-hand, but I hadn’t paid too much attention to those details. I wasn’t sure if I could care less or if I couldn’t, but I’m sure it was one of the two. But I wasn’t telling the Princess that.

“Anyway, Todd want’s to fly me down in the spring. Maybe offer me a job.”

“You?” she asked. I knew what she was thinking. Who in their right mind would offer me a job? I’d often asked myself the same question.

“Yes, me,” I told her with a straight face and a hand on her shoulder. “I’m a highly qualified junior executive.”

“You’re a highly qualified junior something. But executive wasn’t what came to my mind.”

“Look!” I told her with another tap on her shoulder. “Do you see what I see?”

We’d somehow wandered off of Aurora during our distraction and conversation. I didn’t recognize the neighborhood, but I did recognize a gas station, well a gas pump anyway. It wasn’t Texaco and it wasn’t shiny. It sat at the intersection of two roads, kind of lonely looking as if waiting for a friend to stop by. It stood next to a squat yellow building, marked only by a simple sign that read General Store.

Lisa craned her neck to see how much gas would set her back. “36 cents?” she asked incredibly.

I was now looking, too.

“I think the one probably got dropped off. \$1.36 seems a lot more reasonable.”

“It says 36 cents. And it says it right there.”

“For diesel, maybe?”

“For regular. I’m not an idiot, Doug. Look for yourself.”

“Look, if it were 36 cents, cars would be lined up for miles,” I pointed out.

I slid up behind her on the bench set and had a look through the Rambler’s rolled-down window over her shoulder.

“Yep. Probably a mistake. Let’s fill up before they realize it.” I looked down at the gas gauge, now really close to dry. The Rambler needed gas.

I watched her head nod slowly, and her eyes got that look. She was up for mischief. We’d passed up Texaco gas that was too expensive for who knows what kind of gas this was. Mexican maybe, for a penny more a gallon. But with the tank bone dry, we didn’t even really have a choice of checking out their level of sarcasm inside. Now, I’m not all that chivalrous in general, but I’m always up for a good caper, so I guess you could call it that as I jumped out of the damsel’s car and moved quickly to top off the tank. I didn’t see anyone on the way to help. Definitely a self-service deal here. But what I did see was a pay phone on the inside wall of the garage.

“Lisa, a phone,” I whispered as I quickly placed the fuel nozzle into the Rambler. “Now go and call that owner. Explain where we are, and get explicit directions this time.”

“She stepped out of the car and then turned to me with a curious look on her face. “Where are we?”

I tried to get my thoughts around how to explain this hole-in-the wall fork in the road through someone who had obviously no talent for navigation when I caught her smile. I closed my eyes and shook my head slowly with my own smile.

“You got me.”

She skipped toward the garage, admonishing me over her shoulder, “Do not, under any circumstances, Sir Douglas, spill any of that gasoline on my car’s paint. Or you will pay for it.”

I was sure I would. The Sir Douglas told me otherwise, but one thing I knew for sure. She really loved that stupid car. Of all the cars in the

world to fall in love with, this would fall low on my list. I'd fallen for a few myself. But a 1962 Rambler? Maybe it was the big shy eyes in front. Or that cute little crack in the windshield. Whatever it was, I didn't get it. But like it or not, the Rambler looked right at home in front of this place. The once gold front was cracked and fading revealing the white plaster beneath with only a few stubborn strips left to tell the story of its palette in its original glory. Inside the garage, the windows were either cracked or missing and the sorry state of equipment strewn around the floor and on the benches inside made me believe it had been a while since business had been good-or bad for that matter. A zoo of spare parts stacked up against a vertical mountain of tires made its way to the ceiling near the back of the shop.

I pondered and waited as the tank filled. The pump was some type of old rig, so when I heard the tank start to gurgle, I cut it off and popped the meter at \$6.66.

With a bit of care, I let it settle and rounded it out to \$7.00, and in spite of my semi-careful pump handling, I still managed to spill a couple drops onto the paint. By the looks of things, Lisa did that very thing on a regular basis, it's just I had intended to honor her request. I hoped she wouldn't notice as I replaced the nozzle back onto the aging pump and headed to the garage. Turns out, that was the least of my worries.

"Doug," she said, and immediately I knew something was amiss. She went quiet for a moment, her brown eyes as big as the headlights on the Rambler.

"What's the matter?" I asked curiously. She started to say something, then stopped.

"How much for the gas?" she asked.

"Seven bucks."

She stuffed a ten into my hand quickly. "You pay the man," she said.

I turned to watch her get back in the car. Her movements were odd and jerky, and she had nothing more to say to me, staring at me blankly from the driver's seat. I was puzzled, but not for long.

The man behind the counter was terribly burned. I looked at him in horror. He looked at me, too, but his look was a blank stare, a bland disinterested look. His face was a deep shade of crimson, and his entire upper torso, at least that that was visible to me, was covered in blisters

and cracks, as if he'd been put together just as the skin ran out. Molten flesh showed through beneath his right eye and along the bottom half of his left cheek. He held out his hand for the money, but it wasn't really a hand. Fire had mutilated it into a crab-like claw. I gave him the money, but he couldn't grasp it, and I watched it disappear, fluttering down behind the counter. His other hand seem to be in better shape but not much. I tried my best not to stare, but something in the back of my mind held my head in place, an invisible hand directing my gaze at the poor soul who stood before me. He didn't seem to notice me at all. He stared blankly ahead, looking through me to the parking lot and pump beyond. Watching something. Waiting for something.

I forced myself to speak.

"Sir, I think it's great you can offer such great prices on gasoline. I really appreciate it."

He continued to stare at me, and it was hard to tell if his face changed expression or not.

"Don't forget your receipt," he croaked in a rasping voice as he extended his other hand and laid the change and the receipt on the counter. I understood what he'd said, but his voice wasn't like any human voice I'd ever heard. "It's the law," he said.

I looked back at his face, and it seemed alive and pulsating, enough so that I found it hard to hold his gaze any longer. And when I looked away, my blood ran cold. He wore a set of tattered coveralls, and for the first time I realized what the name patch on his chest said. I shivered as I read it.

Doug.

It was too much for me. I took a step toward the door, but turned to scoop the three dollar bills and the receipt off the counter as he'd directed. I didn't meet his gaze again. I couldn't.

* * *

In the car we drove in silence. I'm not squeamish by nature for the most part, but that dude had done a number on me. I stared straight ahead at the street signs and car lots. Lisa did the same. I caught her head moving out of the corner of my eye and wondered if she was going

to be sick. Couldn't blame her if she did. I wasn't feeling so hot myself. Then I realized it was something else. I looked over at her more closely. She'd taken a pen with her to the pay phone, but hadn't taken anything to write on, and as she had this sometimes annoying habit of doing, she'd written the directions on her hand and was now using her left hand as our map. I smiled. Not as bad off as I thought she might be. I sat back and relaxed a little.

With five minutes, however, we had another problem.

"No!" She started with anger and a sharp tone.

"Don't do it. Don't you give up on me." She was talking to the Rambler, both hands banging on the steering wheel in aggravation.

The Rambler's typical Rambler hum had gone silent, and we were coasting now. Lisa switched immediately to coaxing mode.

"C'mon baby. You can do it. Just a little bit longer."

She now turned to me, a helpless shrug with both hands in the air, the big brown eyes now asking me for an answer. We'd just crested a hill, and we were still on Aurora with, lucky for us, a good long downhill stretch ahead of us.

"Hands on the wheel. Eyes on the road," I commanded.

She caught herself immediately and complied. Two blocks ahead, I caught a glimpse of the familiar blue and red chevrons.

"On our right. Two blocks ahead. Chevron station. See it?"

She nodded without turning her head, her lips tight, her gaze fixed on the road, and her grip now glued to the Rambler's wheel.

"It's Sunday. Fingers crossed we find someone there. Maybe we get lucky."

I didn't have a lot of hope, but left it at that. Maybe we would get lucky.

"You know you're going to have to take a pretty serious look at this other car, right Lisa?" I told her as she coasted the Rambler into the open but empty station. "Your best friend here may have breathed her last."

"Don't say that!" she complained. "God, I hope it's nothing major. My Dad will kill me. He loves this old car more than I do."

I had to admire her sincerity, even if I didn't share her love for Ramblers, so I tried to console her.

"Maybe it's something stupid like a loose wire, or maybe something

just got wet and isn't working right."

The white truncated garage door was rolled up, and I hoped we might just find a mechanic on duty. Sure enough, an older guy in coveralls approached the car, wiping his hands with the obligatory red mechanic's rag. He smiled with what teeth he had left beneath a thin cover of white hair the peeked from under his Chevron cap. I wasn't sure if it was the Rambler or the ski jacket princess, but one of the two had turned him pretty friendly. We left the car in his care and ducked across the street for shelter and coffee at a little place called Joe's. By the time we got back, she was back to her usual self, giving me a hard time like always.

The craggy face of our new friend, the Chevron mechanic, peeked out from behind the raised hood of the Rambler as if he were carefully removing himself from the jaws of some white mechanical whale.

"Well, friends, the trouble ain't too deep," he drawled with his somewhere-other-than Seattle accent. "In fact, I won't charge you a thing."

I heard a suppressed exclamation from Lisa's lips. "Yes," she hissed with a happy smile.

But I was curious. What could be so simple, yet powerful enough that it would disable a car in mid-street, making it only marginally more functional than a coasting soap-box racer?

"What was the problem?" I asked.

"Ah, nuthin' much. Matter of the fact is you kids just plum run out of gas." He tilted back his mechanic cap and wiped his hands on his mechanic rag, still smiling. "Gotta watch the gas gauge on some of us older models."

I shook my head vigorously in violent disagreement. "No, it's got to be something else. We *just* filled up."

He was shaking his head, too, the smile still there, but it had turned somewhat perplexed with my question.

"Well, son. I'm not disagreeing with you, but check out the sediment bowl," said as he leaned in and clinked the glass fixture with a pen. "It's dry as a hound dog's bone."

"A sediment what?" Now Lisa was curious, too.

"It's like an old fashioned fuel filter," I explained.

Sure enough, it was empty as my wide-open mouth as I stared at it. I

was dumbfounded and was about to protest, but watched as he put in a couple gallons and turned the key. The Rambler sprang back to life, its Rambler hum ready to take us onward.

I looked at Lisa, fully figuring on a face of hot anger at having been stung on the gas.

She was smiling.

“He likes my car!”

“It’s just his type.”

“He really likes my car.” She was finding it almost as hard to believe as I was. But her attitude changed in an instant.

“Doug, what are we going to do? I’m scared to death about going back to that gas station. Can you go?”

“Shit yes, I can go. We’re both going.”

I didn’t care so much about the ten bucks as I did about the principal of the thing. For me, a recent, marginally employed college grad, 10 bucks meant something, but it was more than that. Someone had pulled a fast one on us and was now having a good laugh. Lisa might be a bit uncertain now, but I knew if I got her going, there would be no stopping her.

* * *

It wasn’t until three days later that we actually made our way back toward the gas station. We were on our way to check out another car and decided to check out the car first and swing by the gas station on the way back. As it turned out, either intentionally or not, we forgot all about the gas rip-off until we were almost home. She called me later to talk about it. The burned guy had made some impression on her and she’d had dreams about him every night since. She wasn’t sleeping well. He’d made an impression on me, too, but I wasn’t losing any sleep over him. I told her to forget about it, we’d just have to deal with it later. It seemed to work for a few days, but by the following Tuesday she was sleeping well enough to get steamed about it again and wanted to go back.

This trip was decidedly different. We were again heading north in the Rambler, but the wet and overcast blanket that covered the northwest had evaporated into one of those glorious, bright and chilly days that

sent autumn shadows over deciduous explosions of red and gold, one post-card view after another to write home about. We found the gas station. It was nestled in the trees like it had been last time, but it looked much different. More ancient and decrepit, if that was even possible. It was clearly abandoned now.

“Those cheap fly-by-night turds,” said Lisa with venom, “Here one day, gone the next. That’s some sly operation.”

I just stared. It wasn’t the same place. Not the same place at all. The pump was there, but it was only a shell of a pump. The doors to the station and the garage were completely gone. Just black holes. Two giant black eyes. No stack of parts and equipment. No cashier counter. Nothing. What had been a cement drive Sunday was now overgrown with knee-high grass. The only thing that looked the same was the coiled hose for compressed air. I shivered. I was creeped out by the guy named Doug who was here, and now even more so that he wasn’t.

Lisa was pretty inventive with her trash talk and continued a stream, non-stop.

Next door, the General Store looked about the same as it had. Maybe a little more faded, but with signs up and an “Open” sign in the window. I bumped Lisa with my elbow.

“C’mon, let’s go ask their neighbors about them.”

A bell chimed as we entered the store. The bespectacled man behind the counter acknowledged our presence with a nod, but said nothing until after we’d done our visual inspection of the store and approached him.

“What can I do for you, today?” he asked, peering over his bifocals.

“I’d like to know something about that gas station next door. How long has it been out of business?” I asked.

He shook his head slowly and closed his eyes, carefully removing his glasses and placing them on the counter.

“Sad. Sad story. Ten, no twelve years now,” he corrected himself.

“Um—”

I stopped before even starting a sentence, not sure how to tell my story and, in the same instant, realizing what he’d just said. I shut my mouth and stared blankly at him, maybe as blankly as the attendant had stared at me.

“All over the papers back then,” the man continued “Nice family. Terrible accident.”

“Explosion?”

He nodded. “Garland family. Killed the boy. Parents didn’t last too much longer after that.”

“Doug?” I asked.

His look at me was sharp with surprise. “Yes, that’s right. Did you know them?”

“I think I might have met him once.”

His narrowed eyes told me he didn’t believe me. So I told him our story. The 36-cent gas, the burned attendant named Doug, the whole story. I had no expectation that he’d believe me. I didn’t really believe it myself. Beside me, Lisa had taken on my blank stare. I thought he might laugh at me, but it felt good to actually tell someone. To my surprise, he didn’t laugh. He wasn’t even smiling. He look worried. He took a handkerchief from inside his button-down sweater and wiped his now moist forehead even though it was as cold inside the store as it was outside.

“You’re not the first to see him. He comes back now and again. It’s a bad sign. A bad sign,” he said again in a mutter. “He showed up just before the mountain blew a couple years back.”

“Mt. St. Helens?”

He nodded. “Just be careful. Watch out for yourselves.”

He said something more about other appearances, but I didn’t hear a bit of them. The story put me into a daze, and I wandered out of the store and back toward what remained of the Garland’s garage. Lisa was beside me, silent still. I walked into the abandoned office where I’d seen the young man standing. He’d been watching something. Waiting. A careless cigarette, maybe. A shower of sparks. Unbelievable heat. For some reason, he had to watch it over and over again. What was it that had he said?

Gone was the counter that I’d taken the receipt and the change from. *Take your receipt*, he’d said. *It’s the law*.

Apparently some laws were made to be broken. Others, I guessed, I just didn’t understand. I’d stuffed the change into my pocket. But now that I thought about it, the three bills and the receipt had disappeared,

too. Just like Doug.

Light filtered through the windowless holes that used to serve an actual purpose, throwing a dim light onto the blackness of the empty space. Something on the cement floor caught my eye, and I bent down to pick it up.

It was wrinkled and damp, but there it was. I gave it to Lisa.

“Your ten bucks,” I told her.

Her mouth was open but silent. She looked first at the bill and then at me. She didn’t know what to say.

I did. Outside the Rambler beckoned, its white paint offering now a different perspective, a different world. A world distinct and apart from the dark stench that had accumulated inside the garage. I took her had in mine.

“You know what?” I said, “I’ve changed my mind. I think you should keep the Rambler.”

Her dread turned to surprise as a smile made its way across her face.

“Really?”

I nodded. “In fact, I think it may just be the only car you’ll ever need.”

Her smile now lit up her face as we headed toward the Rambler. She squeezed my hand softly, and we walked together out into the autumn sunshine and the light.

A note from the author

Thanks for reading! I hope you enjoyed the story. For updates on the development and unveiling of subsequent stories and books, visit me at jamesslaterbooks.com. I post progress reports, writing tips and other odds and ends that amuse me about once a fortnight. Or, even easier, sign up [here](#), and I'll (virtually, of course) hand deliver updates directly to your inbox.

Reviews are always appreciated and help ensure the continued well-being of our storyline, so thanks for that creative and helpful review.

Of course, if you'd like to contact me directly, [email](#) is the best way. I do my best to respond in a timely manner, but I've found timely tends to be a relative term.