

Free Falling

Claire Christoff

“More coffee, sir?”

“Thanks, sweetheart.” He looked up at her from his booth, eyes level with her chest, grinning like a hungry wolf. “You haven’t got any of that pecan pie back there, do you?”

“Just apple, I think.”

“That’ll be just fine.” The waitress slipped her notepad back into the pocket of her apron and filed back to the kitchen.

“Oh, so now we’re staying for dessert. Didn’t you say you’ve done this kind of thing before?” Dick’s companion, a noticeably smaller and more nervous-looking man, was fiddling anxiously with the crumpled bills in his cheap pleather wallet. A fly buzzed against the smudged plexiglass window, mimicking the hum of the fluorescent bulb threatening to burn out overhead. “This was a bad idea—not just some restaurant, but a truck stop diner? What do you think this is, *Pulp Fiction*? We’ve been the only customers in here for the last hour, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Look, Sam—can I call you Sammy? If you can keep your mouth shut and do what I tell you, we’ll be just fine. Can you trust me?”

The waitress returned to the table with the wedge of apple pie, a waxy slice of neon orange cheese congealing onto the crust. “Y’all ready for the check, boys?”

“I’ll take care of it”—Dick snatched the receipt from her hand—“Brandi,” he added, praising her nametag with a salacious eye. Before she had the chance to return to the kitchen, Dick drew a small, gleaming gun from inside his jacket and slammed it onto the countertop with an uncer-

emonious thud. “I hope I won’t have to take care of you, too?” Brandi’s watery blue eyes flashed with terror as she stood frozen in place, shaking her head fervently. “Good. I didn’t think so.”

Sam jumped to his feet in the booth, firing a shot into the ceiling. Broken glass rained onto the green linoleum floor, and Brandi bolted for the door. He fired another shot, hitting her squarely between her shoulder blades. A bright blossom of blood bloomed onto her starched white blouse as she staggered backward, breathless and wide-eyed as ever.

“What’s going on out here?” The cook, a large, toothless man with a paper hat and a child-like face, bumped out of the kitchen.

Sam leapt to the floor, glass crunching beneath his boots, and jammed the butt of his pistol against the unsuspecting man’s neck. “Where’s the cash register?”

“I, uh, I don’t have a key; I’m just, you know, just the cook, and—”

“You want to end up like her?” Dick’s voice boomed from across the small diner, gesturing at Brandi’s lifeless form lying crumpled on the grubby tile.

“I, uh, no—no! No, I just don’t know where—”

“Well, she had a key, didn’t she? You better find one, buddy, or things aren’t going to be looking so good for you, either.”

The cook, whose eyes threatened the kind of big, blubbery tears usually only shed by a toddler, scampered over to Brandi’s limp body and reached tentatively into the pocket of her apron

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for her set of keys. They were hanging neatly from the kind of coiled rubber bracelet you find at hardware stores—a sort of telephone cord reincarnate. “Open the drawer.” Sam pointed his weapon at the cash register, then back at the cook. “Now.”

The cook opened the drawer, his stubby pink fingers shaking violently. Sizing up its contents, Sam turned to Dick accusatorily. “There’s probably not two hundred bucks in there,” he surmised. “I told you this was stupid, and now this girl is dead.”

“Where’s the safe?” Dick demanded.

“We don’t have a safe, sir,” the cook said earnestly, sweat beading on his bald forehead. “You’ve been our only customers today, I reckon.”

Dick knocked his gun against the counter in frustration, accidentally firing another bullet that grazed the cook’s side.

“Yeah, you’re good, Dick. Real good.” Sam shook his head.

“That’s a lot coming from you, Dillinger.”

“I’m twenty-two years old. Give me a break.”

The cook wailed in agony, and Dick drew his gun a third time, shooting him cleanly in the chest and not bothering to spare a glance as the man collapsed on the floor. He shuffled through the unimpressive sheaf of ones, fives, and the occasional twenty before looking up at a languid Sam. “Let’s get out of here, Sammy.”

The night rushed past in a blue haze as Interstate 10 turned into the Pacific Coast Highway. Down below, the rusty, moonlight-bathed wreckage of less adept drivers and their cars struck Sam as being a sort of creepy memorial to something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. He wanted to stick his head out the window of Dick’s pickup truck like a dog and breathe in just one more

taste of that deliciously thick air he had missed so much, but he had a feeling Dick wouldn’t like that. He had just killed a woman—a truck stop waitress at that—and what did he have to show for it? Half of two hundred—odd dollars?

Tom Petty’s nasal twang droned from the half-broken tape deck, singing something about gliding down over Mulholland. “Now what do we do?” Sam wondered aloud, not really expecting an answer. They had money now—a little, anyway—but what did it matter? They had just been released from Chuckawalla Valley State Prison, but they would be headed back if they didn’t do something soon.

Just as Dick was fiddling with a cheap plastic lighter, an unfiltered Camel wagging from his lips, the unmistakable combination of wailing sirens and flashing lights behind them became all too apparent. Craning his neck, Dick jerked the steering wheel to the side, and his truck toppled off the road and into the night’s unforgiving black maw.

Now I’m free, free fallin’...

Yeah I’m free, free fallin’...

Relief washed over Sam as he realized they would never be going back to Chuckawalla Valley again.

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