

Jenny

Jenny found herself in a sunlit field of golden yellow dandelions under a clear blue sky. Her knee length dress mirrored the dandelions' brilliant hue as she frolicked among their buttery petals. She lay back against the cool green grass and let the sun's heat wash over her; warming her skin and making her smile. Gradually, the sun grew brighter; hotter. All around her dandelions wilted and dropped their petals. Jenny sat up, shielded her eyes from the intensifying sun with her right hand and squinted against the painful light. Her left arm began to burn, and when she looked at it, blisters were bubbling to the surface. The sun, now too bright to look at, poured its heat down on her like molten metal. She cowered under the assault, covering her head futilely with her arms as her flesh began to smoke and burn. Jenny woke with a start and jerked her left arm away from the uncomfortably hot metal.

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Interstate road signs were great places to sleep in a pinch. They offered a lofty space to safely lie down twenty feet above the ground and well out of the reach of any passing zombie. Climbing them could be tricky, especially if you happened upon one suspended over the interstate via a smooth steel pole. Jenny preferred the signs suspended by a lattice work of bars and railings. The only problems were the potential of falling (which she remedied by joining two leather belts together to lash herself to her perch) or an irritating burn as the metal sign heated up in the morning light.

Grouchy and sleep deprived, Jenny scooted away from the sign as best she could. She slid the safety belt higher up on her thin chest to fix herself in place, straightened her sleeping mask, and tried to go back to sleep. The sign and her mask would keep the growing sunlight at bay for a little while longer, but noon would see her awake, whether she liked it or not.

A passing breeze blew cool morning air up from beneath her, whipping her long straight brown hair about her face. Irritated, Jenny raked her hair back with her fingers and tucked it behind her ears. She twisted onto her side and gave sleep one last chance. After a few unproductive moments she sighed, slipped her mask off and looked down. Lying on the ground 20 feet below was her only friend. He lay on his side in a large patch of windblown sand that dusted across the three lane highway. His forelegs flexed weakly as he slept, keeping pace with his rear legs as they kicked the air. Jenny smiled as she watched him dream. She tried to fathom the dreams of a dog, imagining him dreaming of chasing a rabbit, hot on its tail, as it darted through a thicket. "Lucky," Jenny mumbled, envious of the sleeping dog. She wiggled the safety belt down around her middle and twisted onto her back. Encouraged by her furry friend, she put her sleeping mask back on and folded her hands across her chest. It was still fairly early, and if just a few more moments' rest brought a little more sleep, she figured it was worth the effort.

Time drifted by Jenny in an unconscionable flow as sleep began to take hold of her at last. Just as she felt herself drifting away, a low growl from below caught her attention. She dismissed it as one of the dog's "phantom enemies" creeping into his dream. It would pass in a moment, she thought, followed by a yip as his dreams shifted in that little dog brain. Instead the growl intensified, quickly becoming alarming. Above him, Jenny froze in place and remained perfectly still. His growl gave way to ferocious barking she recognized all too well.

Whenever he went nuts like this it meant only one thing: someone was there. Normally that someone was a zombie. It would take an interest in the dog and be lead away by him, giving her time to climb down from the sign and escape. But something in his bark was different this time, more insistent. After a few nervous seconds, Jenny twisted herself around to lie on her stomach and slowly pulled her mask off. She looked in the direction the dog was barking; a man was looking back.

"Hey there," the man shouted cheerily over the incessant barking. "I'm Tom. What's your name?" Jenny stared blankly at him.

He looked a lot older than her. Being thirteen, most everyone she had seen or encountered since the dead returned was older than she was. She guessed Tom to be in his thirties. He was tall, a little ratty looking, with wild hair and a few days' scruff on his chin, thin to the point of malnourishment but, like her mom, he had kind eyes.

Jenny didn't move an inch or acknowledge his existence. Her face was a mask of ambivalence and disdain.

Not to be deterred, Tom tried again. "Actually, it's Thomas, but my friends call me Tom."

The dog's barking slowed and lost some of its ire as it became apparent that Tom was not leaving anytime soon.

"Or Tommy."

Jenny thought that if it weren't for her open eyes, Tom would surely have given up by now.

"I have been known to answer to 'Dumb-ass' before," Tom said sarcastically. He shielded his eyes from the sun as its rays stabbed down on him, much like the girl's eyes were doing now.

"How about that one?"

The corner of her mouth turned up for a second. Tom thought either he was beginning to win her over, or she was trying to suck a piece of food from between her teeth.

With that in mind, Tom turned his attention to the dog. Maybe he could win her trust if he could play nice with the dog. It looked like a cross between a German Sheppard and a Labrador. Its thick black coat, flecked with white and grey hairs, tapered into the slender hips and bushy tail of a Sheppard. But its head was wide and square, like someone had set a cinder block on the end of its neck.

The newness of Tom's presence was wearing off, subduing the dog's barking to an occasional yip.

"What's his name?" Tom asked, warily pointing in the dog's direction so as not to enrage it again.

"Rusty," Jenny replied blandly. At the mention of his name, the dog cocked one ear back toward Jenny. The other ear, along with most of his undivided attention, was fixed on Tom.

"Nice name," Tom said with mock enthusiasm. "Jesus kid, give me something to work with here will ya," he muttered under his breath as he turned back to the dog. "So, um, why'd you name him Rusty?" Tom shouted over his shoulder.

"I didn't. It was on his collar."

"I think the kid likes me about as much as you do, Rusty," Tom whispered to the attentive dog.

Rusty replied by sitting down and panting as he looked up at Tom. Wide mouthed, Rusty quivered with excitement as the strange man came closer. Tom cooed to Rusty as he stepped closer, offering his palm for the animal to smell. The dog's pink tongue lolled from the left side of its mouth as Tom tentatively extended his hand in a gesture of peace. Rusty's tail brushed a clean cone shape in the sand beneath him, letting the blacktop peak through. Panting with his tail wagging happily, Rusty let the stranger come within a foot of him. Then he attacked.

A blur of salt-and-pepper fur, slavering jaws and bone-white teeth launched at Tom like a tightly coiled spring. With a hair-raising snarl, Rusty lunged at Tom's hand; his canine jaws snapped shut on the very tip of Tom's middle finger. Were it not for the protection of his fingernail, Tom would have lost the last centimeter of his finger to the dog. Tom flapped his hand furiously, as if he had touched a hot stove. He shouted through the pain as it radiated through his finger and into his wrist, rankling Rusty's ire further into a rage.

Rusty's rear legs touched the earth for a split second before he launched himself at Tom again, this time catching the left elbow of Tom's army jacket firmly in his teeth. Rusty bit down on the fabric, clamping his jaws together like a steel trap. He jerked down with his whole body, snarling and growling as Tom tried to shake him off.

Tom was helpless. He clenched his hands into fists at his jaw line in an attempt to protect his fingers from further injury. Tom dared not let his guard down. If he lowered his arms, Rusty would surely lunge for his throat. If he tried to wrestle the dog from his jacket, he would likely lose a finger or two; maybe even a hand.

Undeterred and growling furiously, Rusty writhed and jerked at the sleeve of John's jacket, throwing all of his weight into pulling Tom to the ground. On two legs Tom posed a threat, but once he was on the ground, Rusty would be the boss.

"Get 'em off me!" Tom shouted, the fear in his voice dragging the last words out, almost into a scream.

"RUSTY, DOWN!" Jenny shouted.

Immediately the dog released Tom and dropped to the ground. He sat at Tom's feet, panting up

at him, tongue lolling from the left side of his mouth again, wagging his tail with all of the joy and anticipation of chasing his favorite chew toy. Warily, Tom glanced at Rusty but avoided eye contact. He knew the dog would wag its tail just as happily as it tore his throat out. The wagging tail said "I want to play;" while the intensity of Rusty's murderous eyes said "I want to chew your face off."

"You shouldn't try to pet him. He doesn't like strangers," Jenny shouted down to Tom with a twinge of sarcasm.

"I'm g-getting that," Tom stammered, fear bubbling in his voice. He stood stock still for a few moments, terrified to move and risk Rusty attacking again. Tom chanced a retreat, carefully shuffling his feet backwards to put some distance between himself and the dog.

Rusty sat still, eyeing Tom's every move.

Tom stopped at the roadside where the asphalt gave way to the gravel shoulder. "So kid, I'm all alone down here with your attack dog..."

"He's not my dog." Jenny interrupted.

"Alright, 'an' attack dog, who obeys you I might add, and I'm really scared to move."

Jenny said nothing. She just stared blankly at Tom.

"Would you please come down? Please, I'm all alone. I've been alone for a long time. I could really use the company. I...I just want someone to talk to." Tom's voice cracked at the end, the loneliness of his travels overwhelming him for a moment. He bowed his head, hiding his face from her. After a short pause, he wiped his sleeve across his eyes and backed farther away from Rusty. The dog didn't move from his spot, or acknowledge Tom's retreat; he simply closed his mouth and perked his ears as Tom backed away.

Once Tom was at a safe distance, he turned his back on the scruffy mutt and left, following his footsteps back up the embankment and into the brush and trees at the roadside, disappearing among them.

It's now or never, Jenny thought.

She quickly unfastened her belts, sat up on her sign perch and called out to Tom, "Jenny. My name's Jenny."

Tom reappeared almost instantly, anxiously parting the scrub brush. "Nice to meet you," he said excitedly. A smile graced his lips, and Jenny smiled back.

Jenny hastily gathered her things, stuffed them into her knapsack and clamored down the sign's steel framework like a gymnast. She dropped from the last few feet, landing with a thud. Tom looked the scrawny girl over as she kicked the numbness out of her legs and retrieved her gear. She looked so young, almost child-like. Jenny had the thin, willowy body and gangly legs of a young girl taking her first tentative steps into adolescence. He couldn't imagine how she had managed to survive so long by herself.

Rusty looked over his shoulder at Jenny as she stood and stretched in the warm morning sun. She tugged her dingy white wifebeater down, hiked her oversized blue jeans up loosely around her navel, threaded a belt through the loops and synched it tight, bunching the waist around her like an accordion. Jenny strode over to Rusty and dragged her fingernails through the fur atop his head, giving it a vigorous scratching that ended with a tug of his right ear. Rusty squinted, momentarily lost in ecstasy.

Tom marveled at the strong, lithe young girl. He guessed her to be less than one hundred pounds and about five feet tall. By comparison, Rusty was most likely taller than her and certainly heavier. Tom shook his head in disbelief and stifled a surprised laugh.

"How old are you?"

"Thirteen. Why?"

"I think you're the youngest person I've seen since...well, since all this happened," Tom said, gesturing to the desolation around them.

Jenny scratched beneath Rusty's ears, acknowledging Tom's statement with a shrug.

"So you're by yourself, I take it?" Tom asked.

"Yeah."

She gave Rusty's head one last scratch then patted the side of his neck, stirring a cloud of dirt from the dog's thick coat. Rusty stood and followed at Jenny's knee as she and Tom began

walking north, along the interstate.

"The whole time?"

"No. My mom died a couple months ago."

"Oh. Hey, I'm sorry. It's none of my business. I shouldn't..." Tom stopped talking and let the faux pas die.

After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence Tom timidly asked, "How'd she die?"

No sooner had it crossed his lips did Jenny spit back angrily in a condescending tone "How does anyone die nowadays?"

"I'm sorry. Really. I'm just...I just want to talk to someone about something, anything other than survival, or zombies, or whatever. Ya know?" Tom stammered uncomfortably.

"Yeah. Yeah, I know," she sighed. The heat of the moment passed and Jenny felt guilty for snapping at Tom.

She pitied him, and hated herself for being so gruff with him. She was about to apologize, the words nearly leaving her lips when Rusty bounded ahead of them, prancing on his toes.

"Uh oh," Jenny smirked at Tom and nodded toward Rusty, diverting his attention to the dog.

Rusty trotted ahead of them, weaving in and out of rows of stalled and abandoned cars, eventually vanishing among them.

"Where's he going?"

"Oh, he does that," Jenny said with a dismissing wave of her hand. "I swear he's part packrat. He'll run off and bring back little treasures for me."

"Like what?" Tom said laughing.

"Toys, sticks...candy bar wrappers; nothing of importance, unless you're a dog."

True to form, Rusty popped out from a cluster of cars far ahead of them, chewing something. The dog trotted happily back to her, tossing his head side to side as his jaws worked over some object in his mouth. "Oh, no you don't," Jenny growled, reaching for Rusty's prize. He turned away from her, enticing her to chase him for it. "Give it!" she commanded, holding her palm out. Rusty looked up at her with forlorn eyes. He chewed his prize twice more before he begrudgingly relinquished a saliva-covered cellophane wrapper. "You know better than that!" Jenny scolded, "Baaad Rusty! You almost choked to death on one of these last time. I swear." She walked over to an abandoned car and tossed the wrapper inside through an open window.

"Hold up a second!" Tom said, quickly trotting down the embankment, his backpack bouncing from left to right as he ran over to some shrubs at the tree line growing alongside the road. He disappeared for a moment behind a hedgerow of brush and reappeared carrying a forearm sized stick. Jenny smiled as he returned, waving the stick, trying to entice Rusty. "Here we go boy! Here it is! A nice, lovely stick for you!"

Rusty regarded the man warily as Tom came to a stop in front of him.

"Man, this dog really don't like me."

"Toss it. He'll fetch it."

Tom reared back and threw the stick ahead of them. Rusty bolted after it; his toenails scratching the asphalt.

"Told ya," Jenny said with a smile.

"Looks like I'm making two friends today," Tom smiled back at her, and Jenny felt a tug of affection for him. "Well," Tom said as they continued their trek, "what would you like to talk about now?"

"Well, I could tell you about the time I ate expired Salami and spent the whole night yaking."

"Oh yes, please!" Tom said in a laugh thick with sarcasm. "I want to hear every chunky detail!"

Jenny rolled her eyes at him and began the tale of the last time she ever tasted salami.

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Daylight faded as the sun sunk lower in the western sky. The long, slender shadows of pine trees reached across three lanes of desolate roadway dotted with abandoned vehicles, turning it into a giant Backgammon board. With no interstate signs in sight to use for shelter, Jenny and Tom found an old brown van smashed into a retaining wall to spend the night. After a quick once-over for hidden zombies and a thorough sniffing by Rusty, the van was deemed safe. The driver's side door was bashed in and twisted open a few inches on its hinges. The door's window glass,

though cracked, held firm as Tom wedged Rusty's fetch stick into a slender gap between the door and the frame. He pried the door open enough to let Jenny slip inside. She stumbled through a hodge-podge of clutter in the van, made her way to the rear doors and opened them, chuckling to herself. When Tom saw the van's interior, with its wall-to-wall shag carpeting, he laughed out loud. They climbed inside the van and tossed all of the clutter and refuse into a pile on the road as the last rays of daylight faded into night. Jenny clicked her tongue, calling Rusty into the van and led him up front to the driver's seat to bed down. Tom and Jenny locked themselves securely inside, said goodnight and fell asleep.

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When Jenny's mother opened her heavily lidded eyes, Jenny was kneeling at her side, pressing a cool damp cloth to her mother's feverish forehead. It was becoming harder for her mom to think clearly. Delirium had come on the heels of a raging fever, the cause of which she refused to show Jenny. Her mom had been slipping in and out of consciousness as the infection coursed through her body. Jenny prayed over her mother's weakened body for half of the day, pleading with God to bring her mother back, if only for a moment, just long enough to tell her mother how much she loved her. Jenny begged God for just enough time to say goodbye.

Her mother's clothes were soaked with sweat. What started as bad cramps a week ago progressed rapidly as an infection set in.

The end was coming, and it was coming fast.

Jenny beamed as her mom's eyes fluttered open. They rolled in their sockets, flashing white, as her pupils slowly rotated forward and fixed on Jenny. "I love you, momma," she said through a grief-choked voice as she dabbed at the sheet of perspiration on her mother's forehead.

"Be strong," her mother said languidly. "Stay alert...have to make...own way now... wish you hadn't...grown up so fast...my fault...all my fault."

"I love you, momma. Please stay with me," Jenny pleaded as tears coursed down her cheeks.

A sudden wave of pain crashed into her mother, stealing her breath. She reached out and grabbed Jenny's wrist tightly. On the heels of her pain, Jenny's mother gained the clarity of mind rarely afforded to the dying. "Don't let anyone tell you what to do. You make up your own mind."

Her mother gritted her teeth as one wave of pain broke and another, larger wave loomed over her.

"Don't let anybody take anything from you! You fight! Fight with everything you've got! You make them wish they had never tried to mess with you in the first place. Don't you ever be a victim.

Fight." Jenny held her mother's hands tightly as another strong wave of pain washed over her ravaged body. Her mother gasped as the pain reached its apex; and with a sigh of relief, her mother was gone.

For four days her mother suffered. Four days of pain and fever. Now her suffering was over.

Jenny lay beside her mother's body and cried. Half a week ago, her mother left in search of food and returned, hours later, disheveled and limping, with a handful of half rotten potatoes. When Jenny asked her what happened all she would say was that a man hurt her. He had hurt her in a way that only a man can hurt a woman. The pain began later that night.

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Increasing pressure on Jenny's bladder woke her from the nightmare memories. As the veil of sleep slowly lifted from her body, she felt an even greater pressure spread all across her abdomen. Hot, sour breath, moist and pungent in her face, brought her awake with a start.

Tom clasped his hand over her mouth, silencing her scream before it began, as he pressed his full weight on top of her. She struggled beneath him, pushing at his chest, beating him with her fists, kicking her legs wildly, trying desperately to throw him off. Tom began to kiss her neck, dragging his lips and tongue along her soft, supple skin.

"Don't fight. I need this," Tom said lustfully as Jenny writhed beneath him. "You need it just as badly as I do, I know you do."

Jenny planted both feet on the carpeted floor and thrust her hips up with all her might. Tom bucked forward, crushing her beneath his body and plowing face-first into the floor just beyond her head, breaking his nose. But he stayed on top of her, straddling her thighs with his. Her screams were muffled under his stomach.

Cursing, Tom climbed back on top and wrestled her left arm to the floor, pinned it down and

groped at her with his free hand. Jenny took advantage of the brief moment of freedom as Tom lifted himself off of her and bit him in the chest.

Tom screamed in rage and pain as her teeth dug into his flesh. He grabbed her by her long dark hair and shoved Jenny's head to the floor. The metal floor under the carpet reverberated with the sound of bone striking steel. Jenny's eyes rolled in their sockets as her vision swam. Blackness had begun to sweep her away into unconsciousness when her mother's voice rang loudly in her head. Fight with everything you got. Don't you ever be a victim!

"You're lucky I was the one to find you!" Tom sneered, "I'm not a bad looking guy. The other guys fishing this area are real pigs. Ugly bastards. They like to wear out the girls they catch before they trade them off to someone else. Hell, some girls don't even live long enough to be traded! You just don't know how good you've got it with me, baby."

Jenny pushed weakly at Tom's chest, trying desperately to keep him at bay, but he was just too heavy. All she could manage was to claw futilely at his chest and shoulder with her right hand as Tom loomed over her.

"I'll take care of you," Tom's tone was menacingly sweet. "I'll provide for you, I'll protect you, but you have to give me what I want, whenever I want it. Now come on baby," he said lustfully, "give me some."

She shrieked as Tom tried to kiss her, wrestling against his hold on her.

"You better change that attitude, young lady, or I'll sell you first chance I get!"

Jenny felt his dry lips pressing against her mouth, his stubbled chin scratching painfully against hers. Tom's tongue glided along her teeth. She opened her mouth and his tongue slid inside, the tip exploring her mouth. Seizing on his mistake, Jenny bit down.

Tom landed two staggering blows to the side of Jenny's head before he knocked her free. Hot coppery blood poured into his mouth. Beneath him, Jenny turned her head to the side and spit a mouthful of his blood onto the floor.

Enraged, Tom punched the side of Jenny's face, splitting his knuckles and opening the thin skin over her cheekbone. She coughed and then spit a lump of pink flesh onto the floor beside her. Tom stared in horror at the end of his tongue, sitting in a pool of his own blood on the van's dirty carpet.

He struck her again and again, raising her split and bleeding skin into a huge, swelling bruise.

Barely conscious, Jenny tried again to buck him off, but to no avail. Her strength was fading. Her will to fight was ebbing away with every blow from Tom's fists.

Weakly she cried out for Rusty.

Tom laughed, drizzling blood from his mouth onto Jenny's shirt. He grabbed her by her bloodied chin and turned her head to face him. "Your gamn gog eh geag! I craged dat pieth of thit's heag wige open!" Tom held his hand to his mouth, shocked at the way he sounded. He gingerly probed his mouth with his fingers, exploring the damage she had done. Tom winced when he poked into the ruined stump that used to be his tongue.

The meaning of Tom's garbled words struck Jenny like a ton of bricks: Rusty was dead. She grieved for a fraction of a second before her survival instinct took over, setting the information aside and focusing on Tom.

Through the pain and confusion of her beating, Jenny forced out a chuckle. The chuckle turned into a laugh as she caught a glimpse of the horrified and helpless look plastered on Tom's face. She had bit off his tongue. Tom would never talk normally again.

"Gon't you laug ah me! Gon't you fugin laug ah me bish!" Tom screamed before striking her again, silencing the spiteful laugh.

Nausea crept into Jenny's gut as she tried to pull herself together. While she teetered on the edge of consciousness, Tom unfastened his belt and pulled his jeans down mid-thigh.

Stay awake! Stay awake! Jenny screamed in her head. She wanted so badly to sleep. To let what would happen, happen to her body but not her mind. She walked the thin line between awareness and unconsciousness, not sure which would better help her endure the act to come, when she felt the hardness of him press against her.

Don't be a victim!

Jenny went limp beneath Tom. She quit fighting. If he was determined to have her, he would. She

could keep fighting and get hurt further, possibly even killed, or she could give in and let it happen. Tears streamed down her temples and onto the van's dirty carpet floor. "Can you let me get up a little," Jenny whimpered. "It's my first time. I don't want you to trade me."

Tom stared at her in the darkness of the van. He looked her up and down, enjoying the power he now had over her. She had given up, and now she was his. His property. His to do with as he pleased. Tom snorted a lusty laugh.

"Can I take my clothes off?"

"Uh-huh," Tom grunted.

Jenny stifled her sobs as she rose up onto her elbows. Lifting her head from the floor sent stars shooting through her vision and made the world spin sickeningly beneath her. She forced herself to stay conscious; she had to get herself together. More importantly, she couldn't take any more of Tom's punches.

Jenny pulled at the belly of her shirt, un-tucking it from her jeans.

Tom's breathing quickened. His excitement was evident through the rising bulge in his underwear. She slipped her blood-stained shirt over her head and tossed it aside. Jenny looked into Tom's eyes as they traced the curve of her bra and saw lust dancing in them. She loosened her belt, unbuttoned her jeans and tugged the button-fly open.

Tom sat back on his heels, breathless.

Jenny slid her thumbs beneath the waist of her jeans and slid them down over her hips. Rising up on her left side, then her right, she slid them down further onto the tops of her thighs. Laughing through his nose, Tom eagerly pulled his shirt up and over his head before tossing it aside. He caught a blur of movement from the corner of his eye and turned just in time to see Jenny land a punch into his chest.

The pain stole his breath away. It was so sharp and pinpointed that Tom thought she had cracked one of his ribs. But how? Confusion wrinkled his brow. He didn't understand how a weak little girl like Jenny could hit so hard. Dumbfounded, Tom groaned as the sharp pain was replaced by a spreading heat coursing down his stomach and thighs.

He looked down at Jenny's fist and saw it wrapped around small black handle, protruding from his chest just below his heart. He watched in disbelief, as if it weren't happening to him but to someone else, as Jenny pulled the knife free and plunged the blade into him again, deep into his stomach.

Tom let out a gurgling whimper. His face twisted in pain and confusion as he fell back against the wall of the van. His hands shook as he grabbed the knife's handle and pulled the blade from his body, dropping it to the floor. Tom's whimpering trailed off into a gurgling scream as his lifeblood coursed from the wounds.

Jenny scurried up to the van's front seats and forced herself between them, shouting for Rusty.

The dog's head glistened in the pale half-light of the moon; a small crowbar lay across his back.

Crying, Jenny timidly touched the blood-slicked top of Rusty's head. She stroked his head gingerly, curling her fingers around his left ear, giving it one last tug as she said goodbye.

Tom screamed in the rear of the van, gurgling unintelligible curses at her.

"Why," Tom whimpered. "Why? I waun't gugga hurg you."

"Weren't gonna hurt me?" Jenny screamed as she whirled around to face him. "You were gonna rape me, you bastard!"

Tom pressed her shirt against his chest trying to stem the flow of blood as it gushed out.

A faint whimper caught her ear, and Jenny turned around. Rusty looked up groggily, his eyes rolling in their sockets. Jenny's heart leapt when the battered dog weakly wagged the tip of his tail. Suddenly Jenny dove to the rear of the van, attacking Tom as he clutched her shirt to his chest and pleaded for her help.

She tore wildly at his face with her fingernails, scratching his eyelids, raking her nails down his cheeks.

Tom threw his arms over his face, futilely trying to fend her off as she clawed into him.

The metal blade of her blood-slicked knife glinted against the dark carpet floor as they fought.

Jenny snatched it up and slammed the knife into Tom's unprotected belly.

He jerked his arms down quickly, trying feebly to grab the knife from her as pain poured into his

body. Jenny pulled away from him and buried the blade into his neck. With a growl of anger she jerked the knife handle down, laying his neck open.

Blood sprayed from the fatal wound, jetting out in rhythm with his beating heart. Its thick, slick warmth covered Jenny and the van wall behind her.

Tom's eyes bulged in their sockets as the last ounces of life drained from his body.

She plunged the knife into his chest, over and over again, cursing him and shouting with every blow.

"Gonna-sell-me! Gonna-rape-me-you-bas-tard! Try-to-kill-my-dog! Fuck-you! Fuck-you!"

She stabbed the knife into him repeatedly, releasing her anger and hatred with every thrust.

Exhausted, she slid away from the body, up to the front seats and leaned between them. She gently stroked Rusty's battered head, whispering to him of the doggie treats and pampering he would receive in the days to come.

Jenny wiped her knife clean on the van's faux hide seatback and slipped it back into its scabbard tucked within the waistband of her panties.

"I'm not a victim, momma. I'll never be a victim," Jenny said in a whisper.

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Jenny breathed a sigh of relief as she peed at the roadside. Without Rusty to tell her if it was safe, she'd had to sit in the van for hours, listening for the walking dead while her bladder screamed for release. Every time she worked up the nerve to leave the van, a noise outside would stay her hand. She would sit quietly, listening, waiting for the threat to manifest, but it never did. Eventually the call of nature won out, and Jenny burst from the van's rear doors to be greeted only by a panorama of abandoned cars and desolate interstate.

Finished, Jenny buttoned up her jeans and clapped the dust from her hands as she walked around the van to the passenger's door. Its hinges creaked in protest as she pulled the door open. She leaned inside, her legs floundering in the air, and with a grunt of effort Jenny pulled Rusty from the van, holding him against her chest like a baby.

Rusty had a thick band of duct tape running from just above his left eye to the back of his head. Jenny didn't have a sewing kit or proper bandages to hold the laceration on Rusty's head closed, so duct tape from the van's glove box would have to do for now. First chance she got, she'd stitch her brave protector up properly.

Rusty's head and muzzle had swelled overnight, grossly distorting his face as the tissues began the long and painful process of healing. A thin string of drool hung from his swollen mouth, joining a thick rope of red and black mucus draining from his nose.

"Well, I don't know about you bub, but I think your nose is broken," Jenny grunted as she adjusted her grip on the large dog.

Rusty lay his head on Jenny's shoulder as she stepped back from the van and stooped, snatched her bag from the ground and began walking north, following the interstate.

"I'm gonna find you the biggest can of Alpo they make and spoon feed it to you. Would you like that sweetie? I'll bet you would. Yeah. You're gonna be my little baby till you're feeling better.

Don't worry. I'll get you all fixed up in no time. How's that sound? Huh? It's nothing but Alpo and snausages from here on out, Rusty."

At the mention of snausages Rusty's tail wagged weakly, brushing against Jenny's knees. She struggled under his weight as she carried him, gritting her teeth at times when she thought her arms would give out.

They made quite a pair; Jenny's face battered and bruised, Rusty's face swollen with his head wrapped in duct tape. She staggered, shifting Rusty's bulk from one arm to the other as her arms grew tired.

With the rising of the sun came a newfound strength Jenny hadn't known she possessed. Dried smears of Tom's blood adorned her face like war paint. She would wash it off later as she and Rusty trekked north, toward mountains and a colder climate.

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