

'88 Toyota Supra

E C Greaves

Violence.

The cigarette smoke hangs heavy in the sultry air—a silver snake, lazily uncoiling itself from the smouldering stub to creep off into the night.

It's paralyzed only briefly by the occasional flashes of colour from the nearby billboards, each silently rehearsing their sales pitch in neon pinks and greens, for the benefit of only bums and streetwalkers. Nobody with the money to spend on anything but their own misery.

The new BMW M5 and Atari's latest personal computer clamour for your eye too, in a violent contrast to the greasy shadows that lurk beneath the overpass where your car now sits idling.

But you're barely paying attention.

Your heart is pounding in your chest. Almost in time with the synthesised bass playing low on the CD player.

'Dance Hall Days' by Wang Chung. It used to be *your* song.

One last, deep drag on the Marlboro Light lets you savour the smooth texture of the smoke, and this short respite as well. Then you flick the butt out the window, kill the motor, and push open the door. Time to get this all over with.

The alleyway behind the Golden Kitchen Chinese restaurant and the old arcade is filthy. Yesterday's newspapers and discarded takeout containers lie strewn across the damp asphalt, along with the usual urban detritus.

The thick scent of used cooking oil and refuse fills your nostrils. But tonight, the familiar perfume of the city has bitter new overtones—the acid notes of the coolant that hisses and bubbles to the ground before your car. The sickly sweet tang of the petrol that leaks from a ruptured fuel tank beneath it.

You make your way around to the front, to survey the damage.

Your '88 Toyota Supra. Top of the line and packed with all the features: Turbocharged three-litre engine, digital dash, power everything—including the maroon leather seats, targa-top roof, and the best Nakamichi stereo money can buy.

Besides a single dent in the bumper, from where Josie flattened your mailbox half a decade back, it looked like it could have driven off the showroom floor yesterday.

Now it's wrecked.

One of the headlights is only half popped up, and it flickers and crackles as bitter greenish steam escapes around it. The windscreen is busted, and a large dent runs up the hood and over the side of the roof. It's not going to be cheap to fix—if it can be fixed at all.

You trace the trajectory of the impact over the car and stop at the back where, bathed in the red glow of the taillights, the cause of the damage is lying in a crumpled wet heap.

He isn't going anywhere presently, so you turn away from where he lies whimpering, and you pop open the trunk.

About a foot long and made from solid drop-forged steel, the tyre wrench is cold and heavy in your sweating hand. You bounce the head of it in your palm, getting a feel for its heft, as you step back towards the man who lies broken and bleeding before you.

He says something you don't quite catch as you roll him onto his back with your foot.

You straddle his chest and grip the collar of his stained and greasy, once-white polo shirt, as you raise the metal tool above your head.

"What was that you said just now?" you ask.

"Why are you doing this, man?" he manages.

Do you tell him who you are and why you're killing him?

Do you just stop and explain the damage he has done to your life—to *her* life too?

Would he remember Josie, from all those years ago? After all, to scum like him, she was just another junkie—she got her fix, he got his sale, maybe a little extra on the side.

The thought sickens you, and strengthens your resolve that much more.

It hadn't been hard to find him—it's not like Josie had thought to write his details in code or anything. And you're pretty sure he used to deal from the old arcade way back then too.

In the end though, you resolve, it doesn't matter whether he knows why you're doing this. It only matters that it's done.

Hollywood really has done an adequate job of preparing you for the sight of a human head being caved in with blunt trauma.

Hell, movies and TV have portrayed all manner of terrible violence such that even the wet crunching sound of the skull giving way is familiar and expected too.

But the thing that all of that on screen violence could *never* have captured—the thing that makes you gag and recoil—is the smell.

It's so fucking awful, you couldn't think of a flowery way to describe it if you tried.

You can't think at all, in fact, while you haul the dead guy into the driver's seat of your Supra.

You reach into your pocket for your meds, and, after wiping your hands as best you can, shake out a few of the little white pills into your palm.

You wash the Lorazepam down with the rum you keep in the glovebox of the Supra. It's only Bacardi, but it's always helped with the headaches, even if it does jack shit for the shakes. The shakes that you pretend only crop up before a meeting with your big clients, and before signing a new deal—not every time you think about Josephine.

You spark up another Marlboro, lean back against your busted car, and look up at the nearby office buildings where so many of those client meetings happen. Where you can try to distract yourself from Josie.

Brooding onyx silhouettes against an artificially amber sky, witnesses to a personal apocalypse, the silent monoliths watch on—detached and dispassionate.

Beneath their solemn vigil, the air in the alley feels thicker now. And it hums with a sort of primal electricity.

Maybe it's the rum, maybe the smoke, but your hands have stopped shaking. For the first time in a long time.

A little while later, it finally starts to rain. But it does little to extinguish the burning wreckage of your '88 Toyota Supra.

Sex.

“It’s not that bad, you know,” you tell her, even though you don’t really believe it yourself.

She lies on the bed in front of you. Your bed. Josie lies naked and crying, on *your* bed.

It used to be a plural *your*, and would’ve still been, if she hadn’t packed her stuff, trashed the place, and taken off in your Supra.

Now though? it’s very much a singular *your*. And you’ve never felt so damned glad for it. Not for... How long?

You realise you haven’t seen her for almost three months since that day, yet here she is. On your bed. As though that plural was the only form of the fucking word.

Of course, it’s not hard to figure out her plan, judging by the Wang Chung song playing softly on your Pioneer hi-fi system.

Dance Hall Days. It used to be your song. The song that played on the stereo in your old man’s truck, as she and you made out for the first time. Five or six years ago, parked at the scenic overlook above the sprawling, nighttime cityscape. No idea how much of a mistake you were both making.

How many times had that song played on repeat while she waited for you to get home tonight, hoping that you might make the same mistake again?

Like some kind of synthesised aural water torture, eroding her will and her sanity as she waited.

How could Josie have possibly known that you’d gone to the bar for a beer after work, and wouldn’t come straight home like you do most Thursday evenings?

How could she have possibly known that you don’t even like the damn song that much anymore?

She sobs into your Sferra Egyptian cotton duvet cover, mascara streaming down her cheeks and blending into the tendrils of raven hair plastered over her swollen, flushed skin.

“It’s not that bad, you know,” you tell her, grimacing at the thought of your drycleaning bill. “One day, you’ll look back on all of this and laugh. It’ll just be a funny story. Hell, you’ll probably just forget it ever happened, right?”

You don’t think it sounded as convincing as you’d intended it to sound. You never *were* very good at this sort of thing.

You perch on the bed and you reach a tentative hand out to comfort her. But she recoils at your touch—her skin is damp and ablaze.

She's sweating, fever-high. Hopefully just a mix of speed and a little booze. But knowing her, maybe something worse.

Nothing's changed—is this all she spent those months doing?

She reaches her own trembling hand up to grasp yours and you notice the familiar scars—more than you remember, though.

Her right arm is a lattice of old wounds and new. A cruel and alien script, etching an indelible tale of sorrow into her pale skin. And for all the blame, all the vitriol, all the loathing cast outward in that epic tragedy, there is tenfold directed inward.

Some are mere cries for attention. Several are genuine attempts to cut the story short.

“I won't forget,” she tells you through tortured sobs. “I can't forget. About you, or us, or anything. I can't forget how much I loved you. But you—you could forget easy. You never loved me.”

She might be right, but you feel that now's probably not the best time to start figuring it all out.

“Hey now, don't be like that. We had some good times,” you say, trying your best at a soothing tone.

But you were never very good at this shit. And your patience for her theatrics has been worn *very* thin over the course of half a decade by now.

You had more than enough of this sort of thing in the lead up to her big, final meltdown. Since then, you've gotten used to knowing it was all over and done with, and you've come to terms with the usual post-breakup void. After the insurance company pays out for your Supra, it'll be as if she never happened.

Now, you just want her gone.

“Look, Josephine, I don't know what you thought this would achieve, but you have to go. Do you want me to call someone? Your mom?”

She looks up at you with unsteady, pleading eyes.

“Please let me stay,” she whispers. “I'll do anything.”

You don't, for one second, doubt that. And that's *precisely* the problem.

How many other guys has she said those words to? Not just over these last months, but while you were still together?

How many “anythings” has she done—just to get another fix, another bump, another reprieve from her constant self-flagellation?

“Josie, come on! You can’t stay here. It’s over. You left. Besides, I have to rest. I have a big meeting tomorrow with the brand manager for BMW. I can’t afford to screw it up, I need this deal. So I’ve gotta focus on that, okay?”

Her tears are a deluge now.

“That’s all you ever cared about. Brands, deals, sales, adverts—not me though, I was never enough for you!”

For God’s sake, this is getting tiresome.

You try to pull a blanket across her glistening body but she pushes it away and rolls onto her back.

“Still not good enough huh?” she asks.

“Don’t be silly, you need to keep warm,” you reply.

You meant it earnestly. Harmlessly. But Josie’s expression changes from pitiful to poisonous. You brace for it.

“So what is it? Why am I not enough? Are my tits too small? Am I too fat? You like skinny young girls don’t you? All those models you get in for your adverts?” She sits up and starts jabbing a finger into your chest with each accusing question.

“I don’t meet the models, Josie, I don’t actually make the ads—you know that,” you protest.

You had enough of this jealousy before, and had thought that you wouldn’t have to deal with it again.

“Don’t lie to me! You do! I remember when you wanted me to get a bikini wax after you did the swimsuit thing with that Russian bitch. Was that because you like little girls, like your models? You some sort of pedo? Is that it?”

Josie’s face is twisted in rage as her absurd logic—and misunderstanding about what an advertising manager actually does for a living—forms a narrative that’s coherent only to her.

You debate telling her that Paulina Porizkova was actually twenty at the time, and isn’t from Russia. But she doesn’t give a shit.

The tears have stopped flowing and are now glittering baubles of hatred that hover, suspended, in the corners of her bloodshot green eyes.

“Why was I never good enough for you? I know you and your stuck-up rich-kid friends all think I’m a stupid hippie. I know you laughed at me behind my back. You and the models you worked with. Did you bang them too? Or just think about them when you were fucking me? They would wax for you, wear those slutty clothes like you wanted, huh? They’d know all about the coolest brands and stuff—they’d be shallow and soulless, just like you!”

You rest your head in your hands and try to focus on the lyrics of the song until she’s finished. But the lyrics tell you that you need each other. Several times, in fact.

Not helpful, Wang Chung—where the hell is the remote?

It doesn’t sound like she’ll be done for a while though, as, once her rage finally burns out, Josie descends into apologies and self pity. Same as always.

After another whole playthrough of that damned song, she hones in on a single concept. A two-word mantra that expresses everything she could hope to express to you in this moment.

“I’m sorry,” she repeats over and over. Her knees drawn up to her chin and her arms wrapped around them in an embrace, as she rocks back and forth slowly.

“I’m sorry.”

It’s your fault though, really. It should be your mantra.

You’re the one who first gave her a taste for those brighter hues, deeper colours and crisper, more vibrant lights that can only come with a line of some really clean powder.

You introduced her to those flavours you only taste when your brain is flooded with dopamine, those little details you hear in your favourite song—imperceptible if you aren’t riding on a really kind, easy buzz, and that transcendent feeling that everything is gonna be alright.

It’s you who should be telling her You’re sorry. You could compartmentalise, you could delineate, you knew where the weekend ended and the real world began, and you knew that everything wouldn’t, in fact, be alright. You still do.

Because you didn’t have all the little cracks and all the little shadowy places inside. The places where insecurities, doubts, and fears grow.

Her soul’s riddled with them—those little cavities—and like a sponge, they suck up the good feelings you get when you’re high.

Everyone knows how it works, everyone's seen Scarface. Seen the movies where it's never enough, and each high's not as good as the last.

Thing is, it *can* be. It's all relative, you see.

The lower your life slides into the gutter, the higher the high feels by comparison. And somewhere in the last months of your relationship, she hit that gutterward slope.

You probably should have done more. But then, what could you do? Rehab? That shit's for losers. And besides, Josie wouldn't have let you help her anyway.

You should have known better from the start. She was always into that fringe stuff. Couldn't tell a Pepsi from a Coke, listened to New Age, not New Wave, and borrowed those records from her mom's collection. On fucking vinyl.

She was the kinda girl who could tell you all about your entire life based on your star chart, but couldn't read a damn map. She could speak to crystals, or spirits through the crystals, or some other mumbo-jumbo. But she couldn't speak to her dad without coming home in tears.

She would be fine with a little Mary-J, or the occasional 'shroom tea, you're sure. But that wasn't the buzz your friends and you were on.

"Josie." You reach out to her and gently touch her face. "You don't need to apologise. It's not your fault. It's mine."

You tell her why, and it feels good to get it out.

That's all it takes to flip the switch on her mood once more. This time though, it's not rage, but desire. You've fucked up now.

She throws herself upon you. Planting kiss after desperate kiss on your face. You raise your palms in defence and try to lean back, away from the assault. She won't relent. She frantically fumbles with your belt buckle, trying to tear your Levi's off you as you attempt to push her away.

This wasn't what you wanted to achieve. You simply wanted confession. You wanted absolution. You wanted to be rid of your share of the blame, so you could be rid of her. You've *really* fucked up now.

You shuffle backwards and try to stand up, but you kneel on the stereo remote, jamming down the volume button. Soon, the song drowns out the sound of the struggle.

And the synthesised bass of Wang Chung's Dance Hall Days drowns out the struggle itself.

You relent.

It's a mix of tears, saliva, and sweat. You're actually surprised at how good it feels.

There's a certain enjoyment to sex that only detachment can bring. Perhaps a little loathing too, if you're honest. For each other, and for yourselves. It makes you forget what sex was like before it.

Afterwards you lie side by side across the width of the bed, her head on your chest, and her legs wrapped around yours. All of the sheets are strewn across the floor.

Time dilates as you lie there in the epilogue to a wasted half-decade.

You breathe deeply the subtle, familiar scent of crisp apples that lingers in her hair, and you listen to the faint rhythmic beating of her heart. You feel it through her breasts, pressed against your shoulder—it pulses softly, almost in time with the synthesised bass playing low on the CD player. Wang Chung, Dance Hall Days. Your song.

She must have taken a lot of whatever it is that she is on tonight, and she is coming down the other side of that peak. She spasms a little every few seconds, and her words are slurred as she starts to confess.

“I thought you'd be mad at me,” she tells you. “I crashed your car into the mailbox. I'm so sorry, I wanted to sell it. Get rid of it so I could forget you. I brought it back though. I looked after it. I know how much you love that car. I think... sometimes... you love it more than you could ever love me.”

She is softly weeping now.

“I feel so alone without you.” She speaks in barely a whisper, staccato, hiccupping. “I feel so cold. I love you. I really, truly love you. I'm so sorry.”

You don't say a word.

The song has finished playing. This time it doesn't repeat, and you lie there without feeling, listening to the distant storm that's slowly brewing beyond the popcorn asbestos above you.

It takes a few minutes to notice that you can't feel her pulse on your shoulder anymore.

But everything is going to be alright. You got your car back. The only thing you ever really loved. Your '88 Toyota Supra.