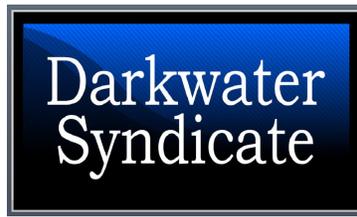


TOLL ROAD

ANTONIO SIMON, JR.



Toll Road
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TOLL ROAD

BY: ANTONIO SIMON, JR.

Every road has its price; every choice has its consequences.

Merritt Owen Galloway slouched in the driver's seat of his idling Chevy Astro van. It was 104 degrees outside, and the air conditioning did little by way of comfort. The parking lot in which he sat was in the grip of a sweltering Florida summer. He was certain that if trench foot and swamp ass were in any way related, he'd have to amputate his buttocks to stave off gangrene.

He toed the throttle, revving the throaty V-6 to two thousand rpm. The added power squeezed a bit more chill out of the van's A/C.

"Goddamn," he grouched, wondering why the hell anyone would want to visit Florida when it got so fucking hot here. Mild sunburn had reddened his thighs beyond the reach of his khaki shorts, and this much was the result of sunlight entering through tinted windows. Merritt hadn't actually been outside his van since leaving Alabama at sunup this morning. And while Florida was outside his usual circuit, money was tight, this job seemed simple enough, and the pay was too good to pass up.

He straightened up in his seat as a land yacht cruised into the parking lot. It was a real looker—a Buick LeSabre, brand-new for 1988, done up in black paint and chrome trim. Behind the wheel was a graying oriental man in a suit with a dolled up missus sitting shotgun and a bowl-cut kiddo in the backseat—or so Merritt could tell through his binoculars. The sedan parked in a spot in front of the turnpike service plaza. As the family got out of their car, Merritt lugged his backpack out of the passenger seat and exited, headed for the plaza's front stoop.

Merritt timed his steps, keeping far enough away so not to spook the family as they crossed the plaza's threshold. Once the automatic doors had shut behind them, Merritt veered to the right and took up position on a bench under the shade of the plaza's awning. He yanked a manila folder from his pack and thumbed through the papers inside it.

The car was a positive match. The photo in his hands depicted the same Buick as had rolled up a minute ago. The man in the photo was Cheung Xi-ang, a Hong Kong hotshot developer of Macau hotel-casinos. With him was his wife, Ana, and four-year-old son, Peter, on their way to a week-long vacation at Disney World. Merritt didn't know a lick about Hong Kong politics, but he knew the value of money, and also that there was a ten thousand dollar bounty on the half-pint's head. Apparently, the boy's daddy had snatched a lucrative contract away from a rival developer. The competition, not ready to throw in the towel just yet, sought leverage to persuade Cheung to bow out gracefully, and by leverage was meant holding his son for ransom. That was where Merritt fit into the equation. In all of the southeastern United States, Merritt was the guy you called on when you wanted someone to disappear.

A half hour went by. Merritt passed the time paging through a newspaper he'd picked up the night before. He didn't read it so much as look as though he were reading it, glancing over the top of the paper each time he turned the pages. He raised the paper to cover his face when he heard the plaza's automatic doors hiss open. Out came Cheung and Ana, with Peter hand-in-hand between them. Merritt gave them some lead before slinking off the bench. With practiced sleight of hand, he drew a cattle prod from his pack and bundled it into his folded-up newspaper.

Merritt hung back until he was about thirty feet away, then jogged after them.

“Sir! Excuse me, sir!” he called out.

The family stopped. Cheung and Ana turned to face him.

Merritt slowed to walking pace and then doubled over, mimicking an exhausted runner at the end of a sprint.

“You forgot your wallet,” he said, panting.

Cheung instinctively let go of his son to pat his back pocket. Merritt sprang up and thrust the cattle prod into the crook of Cheung’s armpit. The prod came to life with a sizzling thunderclap of energy. Cheung leapt with the jolt, collapsing a full ten feet away from where he stood, and fell to the ground hugging his sides.

Merritt then swept the prod across in a wide arc. It whistled over Peter’s head and shattered the bridge of Ana’s nose. As Ana’s hands flew to cover her face, Merritt shoved her to the asphalt and broke into a run with Peter under his arm. No sooner had he reached his van than he flung the boy head-first into the back and leapt into the cabin. He was on the turnpike in moments, with the plaza fading fast into the horizon behind him.

* * *

Merritt slowed to highway speeds once he was safely away from the boy’s parents. He could not afford to attract attention now, not with his prize in hand. Thankfully, he’d seen to that before leaving—he’d been in the kidnapping business too long for him not to have made suitable modifications to his van.

Between the exterior body panels and the interior lining were six inches of soundproofing foam. The rear section had been stripped out to form a holding pen. Just behind the front seats was a bolted-in partition that ran from the roof to the floorboards. The rear gate was padlocked. The windows were limo-tinted—you couldn’t see inside even if you pressed your face to the glass. And assuming you could see through them, you’d only see the metal plates welded into the window frames.

Even with the soundproofing, Merritt could still hear the boy’s cries from the back of the van.

“Ma-ma! Ma-maaa!” the child wailed between sobs.

Crying for his mother. Quaint.

Merritt had had kids, once. Three, in fact, but he hadn’t seen them in years. They’d gone to live with his bitch of an ex-wife after the divorce. Not that he cared. She could keep them, sure as he wouldn’t mind if she turned up dead in a gully.

Ain’t it a bitch how kids always call for mommy when the shit hits the fan? he mused. *It’s never daddy or even uncle. Always mom. Even when child protective services snatch a kid from his abusive, meth-addicted mother, he’ll still cry out for mom.*

Merritt shook his head at this. It only proved one thing: kids are stupid. If he could wish anything for his children, he would wish they not turn out like the whiny brat he had in the back of his van.

A loud thump from just behind his shoulder startled him. It came again, in a rhythmic pounding as the boy kicked at the partition at Merritt’s back.

“Ma-maaa!” the boy wailed.

“Quit that!” Merritt roared, slamming his fist into the divider.

The boy's cries cut out with a shocked yelp and there was silence for a moment, followed by a high-pitched, "Maaa-maaaa!"

Scowling, Merritt returned his hand to the steering wheel. It would be another six hours to the state line, and with this brat wailing for his mother, it had the makings of a long six hours.

He switched on the radio. An old folk tune from the fifties came on through the speakers. He couldn't recall its name, but it vaguely resembled something his father might have listened to when pops was out in the yard working on his truck. An acoustic guitar and double bass accompanied a crooner whose voice was as smooth as goose down.

"Son, if you'll just listen to this old man before he's gone, no matter where you're headed, there's still time to change the road you're on."

Merritt prodded the radio's power button and the music cut to silence. The weather wasn't the only thing that was horrible in Florida—there wasn't a music station worth a damn either. Short of that new cop show, *Miami Vice* and women in bikinis, what the hell good did people see in this God-forsaken state?

"Maa-maaaa!" the boy let out in a screeching falsetto.

"Goddamn it!" Merritt stomped the brake to the floor panel and yoked the van into the highway median. He threw the gearshift into park and then reached under his seat for a black leather pouch. Inside it was a bottle and an array of syringes.

"This'll keep you quiet, you little shit!" he grouched as he pushed the needle into the bottle's top. He drew the plunger back and hesitated at the quarter mark. It'd be a while before his next stop. It'd be best give the kid a double dose.

On second thought, the stuff in the bottle could drop a horse, let alone put the kid out for good if Merritt dosed him too much. He filled the syringe completely but decided on giving him just a quarter of it. The rest of the tranquilizer could sit in the syringe until he was ready for a second helping.

He exited the van and went to the back.

"Time for your medicine, kiddo," he jeered as he swung open the rear door. Just then his head catapulted backward like he'd been lassoed by the neck from behind. The world spun and all he could see was the cloudless sky above. The kid was a blur as he leapt over him and out of the van.

Merritt sat up and braced a hand on the van's bumper for support.

"Son of a bitch!" he roared. He'd kicked him—a snap-kick put the tiny ball of the boy's foot just beneath the bulb of Merritt's nose. Merritt ran his tongue across his teeth and found the top front two were shattered. What was left of them had more ragged angles than a lumberman's saw.

"Get back here, you little fuck!" he yelled after him, breaking into a run.

The boy was fast, and with a head start of a few seconds he'd put several yards between him and the van. Still, he was just a boy, and Merritt's longer stride quickly closed the distance between them. Merritt lunged into a diving tackle, syringe in hand, point-down, like a dagger. In a fluid movement, Merritt knocked him to the grass and sank all three inches of needle into the flesh above the boy's shoulder blade.

He stood up, and when he saw the boy wasn't moving, that was when he realized his mistake. Upon impact with the ground his thumb had bottomed-out the syringe, flooding the child with enough tranq for six grown men.

“Fuck!” he roared, stamping at the ground. He sucked in a breath as he ran his hands through his hair, then exhaled hard out his mouth. The air whistled through the fresh gaps in his teeth. This job was a wash. All that was left to do now was damage control.

He looked one way, then the other. Cars whizzed past him at seventy miles an hour. Had anyone seen him? Didn't matter; he'd worry about that later. Right now he had a bigger mess on his hands. He scooped the boy's limp body off the grass and hustled to the van, then chucked him into the back. The boy lay with his limbs sprawled about, but his head fell in such a way as to lock a sightless stare on Merritt.

The boy's eyes were big and brown as they were in life, except that now they were glassy, empty. Whatever was at one time bright and youthful and alive in those eyes was extinguished, replaced by void.

Merritt was halfway to slamming shut the rear door when he saw this. It made him take pause. He could see the void in the boy's eyes. What was there was not so much emptiness as it was a palpable nothingness—a nonliving yet animate thing that sucked at you like the vortex in a bathtub drain, and wouldn't stop until there was nothing left to take.

A cold sweat broke on Merritt's skin. He shifted his gaze away.

“Fuck it,” he murmured, shutting the door.

Merritt slung himself into the driver's seat and turned the engine. Once the A/C had begun to blow, he bunched his fists onto the top of the steering wheel and rested his face against them.

This job was fucked. Whatever. He'd deal with that once he got home. It was two in the afternoon, and if he drove nonstop he could make it to Alabama by eight, give or take a few minutes for gas stops and piss breaks. Six hours was plenty of time to think.

The fuel gauge registered one-third of a tank. It was another half-hour to the next rest stop, where there'd be fuel and maybe cotton balls for his mouth. The pits where his teeth had been let up a thin but unrelenting trickle of blood. His broken teeth had fallen out of his mouth somewhere in the middle of running the kid down. Making matters worse, the adrenaline of a moment ago was waning, and the pain in his head was coming on in full swing. His tongue brushed a raw nerve and shooting pain ignited in his skull. Merritt screamed with eyes pinched shut, gripping the wheel until at last the pain settled down to more tolerable levels. When next he opened his eyes, the skin over his knuckles was bleached white from how tightly he'd squeezed the steering wheel.

He slouched into the seat. He was in no shape to drive. Enough blood pooled in his mouth every few seconds that he swallowed on instinct, occasioning the tiniest movement of his tongue, which bumped against his exposed nerves each time. The pain was blinding.

His eyebrows bobbed as an idea flashed in his mind. He reached under his seat for the pouch and dug through it, removing the tranq bottle and another syringe. The instructions on the bottle called for injection into muscle tissue, but doing so would only delay its effect. Merritt mainlined the tranq directly into the vein in his arm.

Everything went numb immediately. Thankfully, so too did the pain in his head. It was bizarre feeling. Merritt's body was sluggish but obedient if he coaxed it hard enough. He put his hand on the gearshift but he couldn't feel it. His eyes told him both were in contact, but his hand felt like it was suspended in air.

“I can do this,” he muttered as he rolled the van onto the highway.

He squinted from the concentration needed just to focus on the road. Everything within his field of vision wriggled and danced as though he looked out into the world through a torrent of

falling water. The road ahead stretched to the vanishing point. He shook his head and the road snapped back into place.

“Fuck,” he huffed. The drug was having a greater effect on him than he had anticipated.

An eighteen-wheeler blasted its horn and Merritt jerked the wheel. He edged the van back into his lane as the big rig roared past him on the left. Its trailer stretched on until forever. The truck’s cab was long-gone over the horizon but the trailer just went on and on without any sign of stopping.

Merritt took a hand off the wheel to rub his eyes. The truck and its trailer were now far ahead of him, seemingly having crossed the distance in a blink.

“Afterimages,” Merritt thought out loud.

He glanced to his left, and sure enough, the trailer was gone. He turned his attention to the road ahead and—

“Oh shit!” he screamed as a red subcompact roared past and cut him off, nearly stripping away his van’s front bumper. The car traced a solid red swathe across his field of vision that blotted out the entire road ahead.

He leapt onto the brake with both feet and the van’s tires locked, sending it into a nosedive plunge. Merritt cut a hard left and overcorrected to the right as the van swerved tail-first across the highway, through the shoulder and into the defile beyond, where it tumbled end over end sidewise until it came to rest in the ditch below.

* * *

When Merritt came to, he was strewn across the passenger’s seat with his back against the door and a foot on the dashboard.

“Christ,” he groaned, righting himself. He patted himself down for injuries. His forehead was split open from his scalp to his eyebrows. Aside from that and dull soreness from a bumped knee, he was intact. He shimmed across the center console and settled into the driver’s seat.

The van stood right-side-up on a stretch of grass some ten feet below the highway grade. The defile wasn’t so steep that the van couldn’t make the climb, assuming Merritt could get the engine to turn over.

The key was still in the ignition. Merritt gave it a few twists and eventually the van sputtered to life, going into a rough, loping idle. He hissed his frustration out his nose. The van’s engine was shot, no doubt having spun a rod in the fall. He shifted into drive and the motor nearly cut out; he toed the throttle to keep it alive. The death rattle coming from the engine compartment sounded like a fistful of marbles chucked into a clothes dryer set to full-tilt spin cycle.

The van mounted the defile at a shallow angle, gradually picking up speed as it ran along the slope, until at last it crested over its top and entered the highway.

However long Merritt had lain unconscious in the ditch was impossible to guess, but he could tell this much: it was early afternoon when he skidded off the road, and now it was almost sunset. He flicked the radio on. The time glowed within its digital display: 7:32 p.m.

He’d been out cold for five hours. Hadn’t anyone seen him? Perhaps it was for the better no one had, or else he’d be waking up in a hospital with a lot of explaining to do about the dead boy in the back.

A short burst of static came over the speakers, then music.

“Son, if you’ll just listen...”

“Jesus Christ, again?” Merritt snarled. He pushed the button for the next radio preset.

“...there’s still time to change the road you’re on,” the song continued.

He pushed the third preset button.

“...there’s still time...”

Merritt raised an eyebrow at this. It was rare when two stations played the same song at the same time, rare but possible. But three stations? And synchronized? Florida was indeed too strange a place for Merritt’s liking.

He rolled the tuner knob to the bottom of the dial and worked his way across the stations. First up was 89.2, then 91.4, and then 94.9, followed by 97.1, 101.8, and 103.3, which blared out snippets in rapid succession.

“There’s...”

“...still...”

“...time to...”

“...change...”

“...the road...”

“...you’re on.”

Merritt mashed the radio with his palm and the music cut out. Slowly, he withdrew his hand from the radio’s faceplate, as though fearing any sudden movement might spur it back to life. Merritt was never the superstitious sort, and he considered himself too practical to adopt any religion, but given the recent circumstances, he had to accept that something very odd was at play here.

* * *

Night fell. Merritt reckoned that he had been forty miles away from the nearest service plaza when he’d rolled his van. A drive that should have taken a half-hour was stretching into nearly two from how slowly he had to drive to keep the van from dying.

The motor topped out at fifteen miles per hour, but keeping it at that speed was an exercise in patience. Merritt’s right foot kept steady rhythm like a drummer during an extended solo. He gassed it until the engine strained, then eased off the throttle until it nearly choked out, then prodded the gas again. It was slow-going, and if the van made it to the plaza at all, it’d be coasting into the gas station on its last trickle of fuel.

Something came into view in Merritt’s headlights. Far down along the highway were two cars sitting crosswise in the road. It had been a head-on collision. A pickup truck had hopped the highway’s centerline and slammed into the front of a station wagon. It could not have happened too long ago—both vehicles’ headlights were on.

Merritt rolled to a stop before the accident. There was no activity on the scene. No cop cars, no ambulances, and no passengers from either car in sight. He squinted to peer through the station wagon’s rear window. Nothing. Merritt figured the drivers might have left their cars for the nearest emergency call box. That, or they were dead on site, hurled through the windshield upon colliding. Either way, they didn’t have immediate need of their vehicles, and Merritt’s was on its last legs. He shifted the van into park and got out.

The station wagon was toast. The collision had punched its driver’s side tire almost into the passenger cabin. Assuming he could get it to start, steering it would be impossible. The pickup fared better. Its steel bumper was crumpled into the front wheel wells and the hood was bent up at a steep angle, but the truck looked serviceable enough.

Merritt rounded the front of the station wagon and froze. Something moved within the truck's cab. He crouched behind its front grille and peeked over its fender to watch.

Two bodies were inside. Merritt could see them only in silhouette by the light of the other car's headlights. The person in the driver's seat of the truck's cab tugged furiously at the person sitting shotgun, who offered no resistance.

The driver's door suddenly popped open and the person behind the wheel fell over backwards, landing on his shoulder blades with his legs still in the cab. He kicked his legs up and somersaulted onto his front, then pushed up off the ground and rose into a half-crouch.

Merritt ducked behind the truck's fender. The man he'd just seen fall out of the truck was growling. Then came an animalistic grunt of exertion, and then the scratchy sound of fabric dragged across the truck's faux-leather interior. The passenger's body spilled onto the roadway with a sodden thud. Merritt peeked out from behind the tire for a look.

The body that lay half-in, half-out of the truck had landed on its face—what remained of it, anyway. He had been a big man, with an equally big ginger beard to rival any lumberjack's. His skull had been crushed down to his right eye socket. Black blood and jellied chunks oozed out of the rupture as though he were some grotesquely overgrown soft-boiled egg.

Merritt felt his gorge rise. He wheeled back around and hunched over, spat on the ground to fight off a heaving spell.

Hissing like an angry cat, the first man grabbed hold of the dead body and dragged it clear of the cabin. Merritt sidled the other way around the truck's front to its passenger side to keep from being seen. He peeked over the fender.

It was no man that had pulled the body from the truck. Merritt took a sharp breath and fell backward onto his ass. In the glare of the station wagon's headlights stood a hunched-over creature with backwards-folding knees like a bird's. It was naked, covered only in scabby, ashen skin that stretched taut over its major joints. The filthy black hair on its scalp fell over its face like a stage curtain.

Just then it flung its head back and let up an ear-splitting screech. Its mouth tore open impossibly wide—the creature could swallow a cantaloupe whole, Merritt reckoned. Within its mouth were more jagged teeth than it had any right to have.

The creature hugged the dead body to its chest and leapt, instantly sprouting a pair of fleshy bat wings. It shot into the air and was gone in three beats of its massive wings, disappearing into the night sky.

Merritt scabbled to his feet and ran in a half-crouch, scanning the sky above in case the creature returned. Back at the van, he shifted into drive and toed the gas. The van lurched past the accident scene in fits and starts.

"C'mon, c'mon!" he goaded it, looking up occasionally.

A sudden impact rocked the van. It teetered over onto two wheels, threatening to pitch onto its side. Screaming, Merritt cut the wheel and the van righted itself as it coasted to a halt.

Bam! Bam! The blows came steadily, sounding like a hail of cinderblocks against the van's roof panels. Merritt glanced into his side-view mirror in time to spot a large black shape plummeting onto the roof of his van. The shape landed feet first, then leapt and plunged again, caving in the roof a little more with each landing.

"Shit!" Merritt screamed. He yanked a handgun and a flashlight from the glove box, racked the gun's slide and then bolted from the van.

The creature let up a shrieking trill as it punched a hole through the roof of the van. Merritt shined his light on it and opened fire. His shots whizzed over its head as it shimmied through the hole and dropped into the van's rear holding pen.

Merritt rounded the van to its rear hatch. The key to its padlock was on the key ring still in the ignition, and this made him take pause. He couldn't risk shutting the engine off to unlock the door—there was no telling whether he could get the van to start again. Meanwhile, the creature inside shrieked like a flock of carrion birds fighting over a fresh kill. Merritt took aim and shot the padlock clean off the door.

“Nowhere to hide, you sonofabitch!” he yelled as he flung the hatch open. His flashlight lit the interior of the van as if by daylight. The creature's beady black eyes glowed like a cat's in the flashlight beam. It scooped the dead boy's body to its chest and hissed at Merritt with its jaws wide, flashing its mouthful of misshapen teeth.

A deafening falcon's trill tore from its throat. The sudden noise caught Merritt off guard and he stumbled backward, nearly pitching over. The creature leapt through the hole in the roof, taking wing with the boy in its arms. Merritt tracked its movements with his flashlight and emptied his gun into the night sky. The creature shuddered in midair—proof of a hit. It dropped the boy as it flew off.

The boy had been carried about fifty linear feet from the van, and had fallen to the pavement from about as high up. Merritt ran to where he'd seen him fall and shone his light on him. He shook his head at the sight.

The boy had hit the ground feet first. Both his shins had popped in half like wishbones at Christmas dinner. His pelvis was shattered, and a femur jutted out of his back at a right angle. Merritt was pretty sure that what hung from the end of the splintered femur was the top half of the boy's kidney.

Merritt kicked at the ground in frustration. It was bad enough that the job was a wash with the kid dead, but a mangled body made things worse. A mostly intact corpse could command a ransom from a grieving family, even if only to provide a body for a proper funeral. But this kid—Merritt shook his head again—there wasn't enough of him left even for a closed-casket service.

He slung the boy's corpse over his shoulder and trudged back to the van. There'd be no paycheck for his trouble, but leaving the body out in the open was a liability. Given enough time, the cops might connect him to the boy's death. Crossing state lines would make it a federal offense, and in the federal system, the penalty for murder-one was death. Back home, he'd have means of disposing of the body discretely.

Merritt tossed the boy's body into the back of the van, then clambered into the driver's seat. The van jerked and shuddered as he shifted into gear, but with a prod of the gas, he got it coasting down the highway once more.

* * *

It was a quarter to ten by the time Merritt rolled into the service plaza. He'd arrived not a moment too soon. The van sputtered to a halt and conked out as it trundled up alongside a gas pump.

The plaza was dark except for a single light burning in the service station. Merritt pushed open the door, setting off an electronic door chime. The old man behind the counter turned to face him.

“Oh, hello,” he said in a voice that was croaky from years of cigarettes and bourbon. White hair ringed the crown of his head, which was completely bald. When he smiled, his forehead furrowed into a dozen channels. He set down the packs of cigarettes he had been sorting into the honeycomb shelf behind the counter.

“Fine timing, stranger,” the man went on. His mouth twitched as if out of revulsion, his grin winnowing down to a polite closed-mouth smile when he got a better look at Merritt. Merritt surely must have looked a sight, spattered in his own blood and his upper lip flapping limply without his front teeth to serve as a backstop.

“We were just about to close up,” said the man. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah,” Merritt huffed. He flicked a twenty onto the counter. “I’m parked at pump four.”

“Yessir, yessir,” the man replied, slipping the bill into the register. He shut the cash drawer and locked eyes with Merritt. “Anything else?”

Merritt opened his mouth to respond, but hesitated. “Yeah, uh, how’s business?”

The man shrugged. “Slow, but steady. It’s always been. Things pick up around tourist season.” He chuckled. “There’s a joke in that—if it’s tourist season, why can’t we hunt ‘em, right?”

His laughter cut short as he went into a coughing fit.

“I’m okay,” he wheezed, pounding his chest. “Don’t get old, son. It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. So, what else do you need?”

Merritt’s eyebrows flattened into a look of concern. A question was gnawing at him. He pressed his lips into a line as he thought on how to ask it without looking foolish.

“You seen any...” Merritt trailed off. “Flying things?” He winced at how stupid that must have sounded. “You know, out of the ordinary flying things?”

The old man’s eyebrows bobbed. “Are you talking about flying saucers, boy?” he asked, head cocked to one side.

“No, no,” Merritt said. “I mean...”

“Well, the only big flying things you’ll see around here are buzzards,” the man interrupted. “They’re big, and they’re ugly, but they won’t bother you. They only go after dead things.”

Merritt clenched his jaw at the thought of walking outside and finding an incriminating flock of vultures perched atop his van.

“That’s good to know. Good night,” he muttered before heading out. His hand had scarcely grazed the door’s push bar when the man called out after him.

“You ever see an angel?”

Merritt halted, then turned in place. The old man worked with his back to him, sorting the cigarette packs into their respective shelves.

“No,” Merritt said.

“Hmph. Not that you’d recognize one if you did. You know they’re the same thing, right? Angels and demons. The only difference is your point of reference. You see what you want to see.”

“What’s this got to do with anything?” Merritt demanded.

The old man paused halfway to putting a pack into its slot. “Nothing, mister,” he said without looking back. He slipped the pack into its cubbyhole and reached for another. “Just wanted to chit-chat, is all. It gets lonely out here with no one to talk to.”

The digital clock on the wall chirped twice to mark ten o’clock.

“It’s closing time,” said the man. “Be safe out there on the road.”

* * *

Toe down, toe up. Throttle, coast. Rev, idle. The lights of the service plaza faded to pinpoints in Merritt's rearview mirror; all the while he kept metronomic rhythm on the gas pedal. His eyelids drooped. Between the engine's drone and the physical exhaustion of having driven for hours, he fought to stay awake.

He glanced at the dashboard clock. It had been twenty minutes since he'd left the plaza. In that time, he had seen not a single other car coming or going along the highway. The road ahead—at least what little of it he could see in his headlights—was perfectly straight and claustrophobically dark. There were no streetlamps, not so much as a yellow reflector set into the asphalt to separate one lane from the other. He could not shake the feeling that he was hopelessly adrift on some twilight sea that stretched indefinitely to the horizon and yet never met shore.

Merritt jerked erect in his seat when the piercing cry of a falcon came from somewhere much too close for comfort. He butted his forehead up against the windshield and strained his eyes to look beyond the van's roofline. The sky held no answers. There were no stars, no moon, and no contrast against which to spot anything that might be flying above.

The screech came again, and Merritt turned toward its source not a moment too soon as the bird creature plowed head first through the passenger-side window. Merritt's arms flew to cover his face as a hail of shattered glass pelted him. The creature's shoulder had caught on the van's A-pillar, halting its forward travel, leaving it doubled over the window half-in, half-out of the vehicle. It clawed at him, scrabbling for purchase as it wriggled through the window toward Merritt.

Merritt braced his left foot against the rocker panel and lunged with his opposite fist in the lead, landing a haymaker on the creature's jaw. The beast's head spun with the blow and its body followed, turning sidewise and slamming its open mouth against the dashboard, its fangs raking channels into the upholstery. With a cobra's quickness, the monster lashed out and got a mouthful of Merritt's right thigh just above the knee. Merritt screamed—eyes shut, mouth wide—at what felt like a rusty bear trap that had clapped shut around his leg.

Merritt dug both hands into the creature's hair and wrenched its mouth off of him. The creature squawked in frustration, thrashing its jaws and flailing its talons through the air. An errant swipe traced a hot red line beneath the orbit of Merritt's eye to his ear, lopping off the bottommost tip of his earlobe. The sudden rush of pain set off a flashbulb before Merritt's eyes and his vision cut to white for a heartbeat. When next he could see, he was strewn across the passenger cabin with his arms stretched out before him. The creature squatted with its clawed feet on the windowsill, bent in half with its hindquarters hanging outside the van, its hands locked on Merritt's wrists. Its giant pair of leathery wings burst out of the skin between its shoulder blades.

The creature leapt backward from its perch, catapulting Merritt through the passenger cabin of his van in a head first dive for the window. His foot snagged in the loop of the van's steering wheel. Merritt could feel his vertebrae pop from neck to crotch in rapid succession like firecrackers as the opposed forces threatened to snap his spinal column in two. His wrists slipped out of the creature's grasp as it rocketed into the air and vanished against the sooty backdrop of the sky.

The night was quiet once more, the only sound coming from the van's dying engine. Groaning, Merritt shimmied across the center console, eventually settling back in the driver's seat. Knifing hurt spiked all along his spine. He knew he'd be lucky if this pain was the worst of

what the creature had inflicted on him, as there were worse things—paralysis and instant-onset spinal arthritis came to mind.

He wriggled his fingers, then his toes. Everything moved as he willed it to, until he tried to hunch his shoulders. A pins-and-needles numbness seized his left arm each time he tried to move it. It felt as though his biological wiring had frayed and was making a bad connection someplace short of where the motor signals were needed. He reached across with his good arm to pat down for injuries and sucked in an alarmed breath at what he found. The top of his wounded shoulder was steeply concave, his shoulder joint having been yanked out of its socket during the fight. Running his fingers down his arm, he found the dislocated joint halfway down his ribcage.

Merritt hissed through gritted teeth. The site of his injury had swollen, and the slightest pressure sent waves of pain shooting through his arm.

The driver's side window exploded in a blizzard of shattered glass. A pair of scabby hands clutched Merritt's head and wrenched it sideways in an attempt to yank him out through the window. His body wheeled with the movement, sending his right foot to the floorboard with the brake pedal pinned beneath it. The van pitched forward into a nosedive, breaking the creature's grip on Merritt. The creature tumbled sidewise on the asphalt, ending up hunched over on its feet ahead of Merritt's headlights. Its angular face contorted as it trilled an open-mouthed falcon cry.

Merritt stomped the gas, not caring that the engine's shudders and coughs threatened catastrophic detonation at any moment. The van stumbled ahead several yards then bucked like a rodeo bull, cutting its acceleration short just before impact. It had picked up enough speed to knock the bird creature onto the hood then pitch it into backward cartwheels on the pavement.

Merritt shifted into park. He craned his right hand behind his seat, frantically pawing at the upholstered floor panel. His fingers brushed against his cattle prod. He snapped it up into his grip before popping the door open and shuffling outside.

"Time to fry, you sonofabitch!" he snarled, thumbing the prod's on switch. Up ahead in the beams of his van's headlights, the creature was beginning to stir. He quickened his pace.

Merritt whirled in place at the sound of a piercing scream behind him. A second bird creature swooped down and perched atop his van. It bent at the waist to peer into the hole in the van's roof, looking around with jerky movements of its neck.

"Oh goddamn it!" Merritt said, or rather half-said for he was not partway through when a sudden blow knocked him to the pavement. The fall drove his entire weight onto his right cheekbone, splitting his skin open like a zipper. A heavy mass pinned him to the ground amid shrieks and caws.

Merritt drew his knees up beneath him as a pair of claws gripped his shirt at the collar and yanked him erect from behind. No sooner was he upright than two arms closed around his torso and lifted him bodily off the ground.

"No!" he screamed, but was drowned out as the bird creature trilled in anticipation of taking off. The creature's wings burst out of its skin with a ripping sound, like the sound of fabric tearing under strain but more organic, wetter.

Merritt thrashed his legs to no avail as the creature's wings came down in that initial, mighty beat that would send them both rocketing airborne. By sheer dumb luck his heel smashed into the creature's groin. The creature didn't seem too hurt by this but the blow had thrown it off balance, affording Merritt an opportunity to wriggle out of its iron grasp. His feet grazed the asphalt and he staggered, ran a step, lost his footing and fell with a half turn onto his back.

Shrieking in outrage, the creature lunged for him. Merritt met its pounce halfway with a thrust from his cattle prod, driving its metal tines into the creature's throat just beneath the chin.

The prod discharged with a crack and the sizzle of seared flesh. The creature reared up with its arms bent into useless crooks from the jolts of energy that fried its insides. It flopped onto its back, jerking and thrashing as though racked by a seizure, its dying howl leaving its ruined throat in weak gurgles and rasps. Before long the creature stopped moving, save for the rare instance where the last bit of energy in the prod's spent batteries caused its leg or its arm to twitch.

Merritt got on his feet. The cattle prod stood at ten degrees from vertical, looking like a tossed javelin. He braced a foot against the creature's chest and gave the prod a yank, tearing it free. Then he pivoted on one leg and hurled the cattle prod at the other bird creature sitting on the roof of his van. The whirring prod split the air across the several yards between them. It slammed into the van's side panel—he'd undershot his throw—but the sound this produced so startled the other bird creature that it lost its footing and tumbled over the roof's edge.

Merritt had already broken into a run for the van the moment the prod had gone airborne. He caught the driver's side door and whipped around it, nearly pitching headlong into the passenger cabin from the momentum. In his mad rush to get back to the van he had failed to realize he was not alone.

"Ma-ma."

It wasn't a whimper.

It wasn't from the pen behind him.

It was angry, it was resolute, it was deliberate, and worst of all—it was on the seat right next to him.

Merritt's mouth popped open at first sight of the boy sitting shotgun. It was him, there was no mistaking it. If his bowl haircut and mangled legs weren't a giveaway, then the splintered femur that jutted out of his back for the length of a knitting needle was convincing enough. Merritt didn't have time to scream as the boy's hand descended onto his thigh with all the force of a parcel truck driven off of a cliff.

The engine roared with unnatural vigor. The cabin lights flickered; the instrument panel's needles whipped back and forth—empty to full, empty to full—a wall of solid static hissed from the speakers; the A/C went full-blast hot.

The tires whirled in place for a heartbeat amid the screech of rubber on asphalt before catapulting the van down the highway. Merritt was hurled backward against his seat as the van's nose pitched skyward with the force of its acceleration. He could do little else but cling to the steering wheel.

"Ma-ma!" the boy shrieked over the roar of the engine. His voice no longer was that of a child. It was furious and laden with hate, sibilant and raspy as a den of pit vipers and bearing within it as much venom.

"Ma-ma!" the boy shouted again, louder this time.

The engine's thrum grew to a pitchy whine as the tachometer needle swept its dial—four thousand rpm, then five thousand. The needle blew past the yellow zone and plunged into redline where it butted up against its backstop, yet the van was still accelerating. The speedometer was pegged at max. The odometer spun in a dizzying blur like the wheels of a slot machine.

Merritt screamed but couldn't hear himself over the noise; the engine sounded like a jetliner warming up. Much as he jerked and jumped in his seat, he could not lift his foot from the accelerator. The boy's hand had pinned it in place.

"Ma-ma!" the boy barked, and Merritt heard this even over the din. That short word came out in a crushing, accusatory tone as though the phrase: "How dare you!" had been distilled to its basest sentiments and concentrated to lethal potency.

The boy clenched his hand, driving his fingertips into the tendons just above Merritt's kneecap. Merritt felt his mouth pop open in a howl of pain but heard none of it. All sensation south of his knee cut out as though his leg had gone rogue.

A sharp bang came from the engine compartment. Smoke trailed from the gaps on either side of the hood where it met the fenders; some of this smoke wafted into the cabin through the A/C vents. The fumes carried an acrid tang that burned Merritt's throat and caused his eyes to tear up. The engine was running rich with unburned fuel.

The hood popped loose and slapped the windshield with tremendous force. Merritt tucked his head beneath his arm as fragments of safety glass peppered the cabin. The windshield was shattered but mostly intact within its frame. No sooner had he noticed this than the hood was shorn off its supports and flipped up into the air like paper caught in a breeze, taking with it the better part of the pane of windshield glass.

There was another bang and the van's air cleaner shot hundreds of feet into the air. The engine compartment belched smoke like a locomotive's funnel. What Merritt saw through the smoke triggered a particular sort of fear in him, one he'd only ever experienced but once before in his lifetime. It was the sort of mortal dread that sent a sheaf of ice ratcheting down his spine to his balls and made his nuts shrink to the size of frozen peas. At the very heart of the cloud of unburnt fuel was an orange glimmer that could mean only one thing—his carburetor had caught fire.

"Ma-ma," the boy uttered in little more than a growl. His lips were pulled back in a clenched-jaw smile that showed all his teeth. Amid the haze and the flickering cabin light, Merritt could have sworn the kid's teeth were serrated like the business end of a hacksaw.

The radio static cut out with music taking its place. The crooner's voice blasted painfully loud in Merritt's skull, repeating itself at high speed as if the disk jockey had placed a scratched LP onto a turntable set to 78 rpm.

"...there's-still-time there's-still-time there's-still-time..."

The engine misfired. Something like a tiny red mushroom cloud chuffed out of the carburetor. The stuck-open throttle sucked the blaze back down into the engine, and for a moment, the night was pitch black. Then the fuel in the engine block ignited. The van lit up like a miniature sun with Merritt sitting at the very heart of its nuclear furnace.

A searing corona of flame surged into the van's passenger cabin. Merritt thought to shield his face with his arms but his arms refused to move. The blast of heat had come on faster than Merritt could react and had fused the flesh and bone of his clenched hands to the steering wheel.

The tang of gasoline in the air gave way to the bitter stink of singed hair and charred meat. Intense orange light stung his pupils even through his pinched-shut eyes, but this was momentary, lasting only so long as it took for the heat to sear away his eyelids. Once those were gone, he missed them immediately, for he had no way to blot out what he saw was happening to him.

The skin on his arms turned to jelly, sluicing off his bones and almost instantly evaporating in the open air between his elbows and thighs. His exposed forearm muscles bulged and warped in the flames as his blood boiled within them. His blood turned to steam, swelling in his arms in softball-sized pockets before bursting out in wet blasts of hot mist. The ragged edges of his torn-open flesh were instantly singed black, and from the forearms down nothing was left of his arms but bones.

Merritt screamed, thrashing his head from side to side as though desperately saying, “No-no-no!” to what was happening. Before long he could hardly move—the driver’s seat had melted into his body, inextricably fusing them into a jellied mass of flesh and vinyl.

The fire entered his body—entered it in the truest sense of the word, for Merritt had never before felt so violated. The fire was *inside* him, in each of his blood vessels down to the tiniest capillary. Ropes of fire thrashed in his insides like a mass of pipe cleaners rammed into a bathtub drain, except that the ropes were also wasp venom and broken glass and razor wire and all sorts of things meant only to cause hurt. As the fire ate away at him, charring his skin to ash that flaked away in the breeze, he could not shut his eyes, he could not turn away.

“Ma-ma!” the boy trilled, triumphant. His face had melted away in the heat, yet he watched Merritt with black pits for eye sockets, grinned at him with a face that was little more than a bloodstained skull.

“Ma-ma! Ma-ma!” he cheered.

“...there’s-still-time there’s-still-time there’s-still-time...” the radio answered, it and the child locked in a discordant and nonsensical call-and-response.

All the while the van accelerated, its mounting speed fanning the flames, pushing faster, faster, faster even than the van had ever any right to be, along the straight shot of desolate highway. The horizon stretched to infinity. The road blurred into streaks and the streaks became solid lines as time and physical space ceased to hold meaning.

The van and Merritt were no longer on fire—they *were* fire, the whole of their reality was fire, and would be into the ever after.

* * *

Merritt leapt out of his seat from sheer nervous tension alone. He was panting. It was a long string of moments before he could settle down and make sense of his surroundings.

He was sweating—justifiably, as his van sat idling in an asphalt parking lot under the midday sun. And yet, there was something more to his sweat than was apparent at first blush. There was a faint stink to him, the kind of scent one exudes when under intense stress. Merritt knew that scent from how often he had detected it on others; it was fear. He sniffed the air again just to be sure and proved himself right, except this time he noted a subtle underpinning of brimstone.

He shuddered.

What the hell had just happened? Had he fallen asleep? That was likely. He’d been driving for hours since leaving Alabama early this morning.

Had this been a nightmare? That wasn’t outside the sphere of possibility, despite that Merritt couldn’t recall the last time he’d gone to sleep and remembered what he’d dreamt the night before.

He racked his brain for answers and found none. Despite his doubts, he was certain of one thing, and it was that whatever he had experienced just now had scared the shit out of him. He lingered on that thought. For a man who doesn’t scare easy to have a nightmare was no small thing.

It was stiflingly hot in the van. He reached for the A/C controls and inadvertently brushed against the radio seek knob.

“...there’s still time to change the road you’re on...”

Merritt withdrew his hand like he'd touched a boiling kettle. He froze, staring wide-eyed at the radio as the song droned on. Memories that weren't his flashed before his mind's eye in snippets, coming too fast to form any coherent links between them.

Getting kicked in the teeth.

Sticking some boy with a needle.

A creature that was half-man, half-vulture.

Some old man asking him: "You ever see an angel?" and following that with: "Not that you'd recognize one."

"...there's-still-time there's-still-time..."

Fire.

"Ma-ma!"

That last voice in his head was so loud that it would have blown out his eardrums if he hadn't imagined it. It was a boy's voice. A young boy.

Merritt instinctively glanced to his right. The backpack on the seat beside him had spilled its contents to the van's floorboard. A photograph peeked out from behind the cover of the manila folder containing it. There were three people in the photo: two adults, and standing between them, hand-in-hand with his parents, a boy.

A young boy.

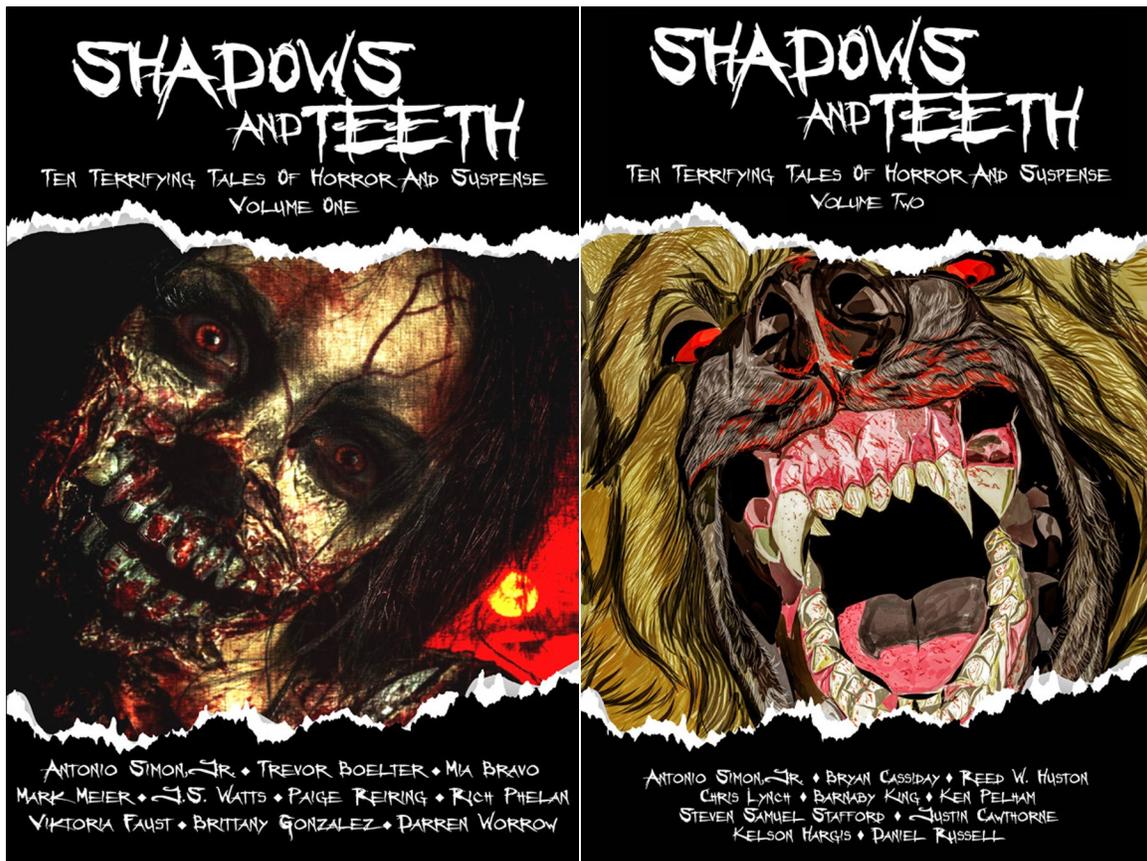
Movement from out of the corner of Merritt's eye caught his attention.

The black Buick he'd been waiting for rolled into the parking lot.

Merritt gathered his tools and stepped out of the van.

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sucker punch fights to keep the cash he rightfully stole from a powerful crime syndicate—and if he's lucky, his life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
ANTONIO SIMON, JR.

Antonio Simon, Jr. is an award-winning author of several books. His debut novel, *The Gullwing Odyssey*, is a fantasy-comedy that became an instant hit in 2013. He has also written *Miami Is Missing*, which explores the hidden history of Miami's abandoned places, and *R.A.G.E.*, an innovative and fast-paced roleplaying game system. He has won the prestigious Royal Palm Literary Award; the Pacific Book Award; Indie Book of the Day; and the Reader's Favorite Five-Star seal.

Mr. Simon holds a law degree from Saint Thomas University School of Law and two undergraduate degrees (Political Science and History) from the University of Miami. He lives in Miami, Florida.

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