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The Unsilent Night

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IN THE CAR.

The Un-Silent Night

'Twas the night before, the night before Christmas; and the night was ours; the sky black and starless. The headlights of the Lincoln bored a tunnel through the darkness, swept the roadside, the houses decorated but the windows darkened, horses asleep on their feet, unmindful of traffic.

That was the way I liked it. The night belonged! I'm Carl Wallerich, 15; Ted Forshee was telling a seedy story to Ron Blackaby, who was driving. The car, a new Continental, belonged to Ron's father. The story was not so very funny, but we all laughed at the pornographic ending. We were well out of Seattle now, on I-5, the freeway. Prior to our leaving, Ron had suggested that we pick up Nick Fusco, but Ted objected. "Why take that tar baby?" Nick, too, was 15, a doctor's son an honor student.

Ron said, "It's easier to get the car if I take Nick."

"Probably spills everything we do," Ted said.

I wondered if that was why they had taken me, because they thought I was short-mouthed; or hoped so, or because Ron knew my father.

My father and Ron's are friends. At least, they're

colleagues. Both are attorneys. Mr. Blackaby specializes mostly in corporation work, whereas my dad is just general practice. Ron and Ted are both 18, and seniors in Lakes High. Ted is one of the biggest wheels in school, a star halfback. I'm not often asked to go out with Ron and Ted, who go everywhere together.

In the front seat, Ted twirled the radio dial and the loud voice of a man came on and filled the car with Christmas music, but not carols, Old Santa stuff, made up by somebody who didn't care much for Christmas.

The car was some rod, I thought, everything automatic and controlled by push buttons. My father drives a three-year-old Chev. He would never buy a car like a Lincoln, because he thought they looked too high toned, even if he had the dough. He was like that with everything, the furniture in the house and in his office, second hand stuff he polished to look like new. He didn't have any use for really dress-up clothes and neckties. He just didn't go in for any kind of flash..

His practice is mostly wills and estate, and like that. He didn't like much the criminal laws and the way they were sometimes made use of by some jack lawyers.

Blackabies live in a great big house, that has a swimming pool and all. They aslo have two Lincolns. Mrs. Blackaby has her own. That's why it's so easy for Ron to get the car for an evening out. Mr. Blackaby gives Ron almost

anything Ron asks for.

Of course my old man spoils me, too. although I've been taught enough, to not go overboard in asking. He watches for my gradecard and scans it with an eagle eye and sets my study time before I turn on the tube. I hate to think what he would do if he caught me smoking. He taught me how to drive the car a long time ago, but, to be sure, I can't take it out alone until I've taken and passed my driver's test. And it will be a coon's age before I can drive any place like to Seattle.

But all the same, I wouldn't trade him for any pop I've ever known. He's never whipped me. and when he's threatened, he does it in a kind of joking way. I'm not at all sure he would have given his consent for me to go along with Ron if he knew where he's going.

Once I asked Mother why Father didn't go for some of the kinds of cases Mr. Blackaby had. I know he's smart enough. Secretly, I sometimes think he might be a smarter lawyer than Mr. Blackaby, because Mr. Blackaby often calls him for advice about something to do with the law. They have long talks on the telephone.

Sometimes Father laughs a little about the calls, with Mother. "George is behind the eight ball again," he tells her, "or thinks he is. But he always comes out on top. He's a genius at his profession. I tell him that."

It was after one of these calls that I asked Mother

about the big money work. "Oh," she said, "I guess he just likes doing things for ordinary people in trouble." I didn't say any more. But sometimes I think it's kind of dumb of Father to take cases for people like Old Man Bray, who was about to be euchered out of his little farm by some shyster developers. Father was as happy when he won that case as though the fee were going to be a couple of thousand instead of just peanuts. I happen to know he got very little for all the hours of work and his trips to court.

Ron swung the car to the center lane to pass an old Plymouth that was poking along as though the driver had all night. "Take it out of reverse!" Ted yelled, and Ron bore down on the musical horn.

Ron always passed everyone on the road. He's a good driver. Of course he's had a few brushes with the law for going too fast. You couldn't hardly hold the Lincoln down, he said. But with a father like Mr. Blackaby, Ron didn't really need to worry much, I thought. Mr. Blackaby always makes big donations to the policemen's benefits. Ron didn't even lose his license the time he was playing pole bend with the car and knocked down a light standard.

The one time I was stopped and given a warning ticket, I had to pay my own fine and do without the car for six weeks.

The hand on the Lincoln's speedometer held steady on 70. Mr. Blackaby thought the 55-mile-an-hour speed limit

was ridiculous on the freeway. He was always trying to get the legislature to change it. Ron laced his fingers together behind his head for a moment and said, "Look, Maw, no hands," just to show how the Lincoln holds the road.

I didn't mind. Sure I was a little scared, but it was the kind of scary thrill you get on the Roller Coaster or the Mouse at the carnival. I was glad we hadn't brought any girls. Ron had the windows down and there was a rush of cool air through the car. Girls are always fussing about the wind getting their hair mussed or begging you to slow down, or telling you they have to be home by twelve.

"I'm supposed to be in by one, but I don't always make it. And I wasn't going to worry. You can't always be harping about the time when you're in someone else's car. My folks ought to know that. I hadn't really known we were going to Seattle. I didn't think Ron had any curfew and nobody seemed to care when Ted got in. Ted's folks, who are kind of tacky, stay out half the night themselves. Even the picture shows are often double features, and the drive-ins don't start until after dark and run until all hours.

Not that Ron and Ted often go to a show when I'm along. Ron's the only one of the three of us that has the kind of money the movies cost now. We mostly just drive around when I'm along, stop in at the drive-ins where our friends stop. That's more fun. Sometimes Ted lights firecrackers and throws them out the car windows in front of motorists we pass. Ted

always has a pocket full of keen firecrackers. They're sold illegally on Indian reservations.

A while back, Ron and Ted "collected" Buick radiator ornaments. All the kids did that for a time. I got one once but Father raised Cain when he found it in my room. He said that taking radiator ornaments was stealing, and as bad as vandalism, and ordered me to return the gadget to the owner of the car. That was impossible of course. The kids at Lakes simply removed the ornaments from cars in the parking lot during school functions, not knowing who the cars belonged to.

"Time is it?" Ron asked Ted, letting up a little on the foot feed.

Ted said, "One-thirty. Let's stop for a beer. There's a joint right down the road here." Ted knows his way around all right.

Sure enough, within a quarter mile or so a sign read Coconut Grove and showed a life-size girl in a hula skirt. Ron crossed from the center lane in front of an oncoming Mercury. There was plenty of room but the man in the Mercury bore down on his horn and yelled something I didn't catch. Ron turned on his spot to illuminate the narrow exit road that ran through a grove of trees. For some reason to do with block protection in the posh area where the Blackabys live, Mr. Blackaby is allowed a spot.

Keeping the spot on, Ron drove down the curving road. About half way in we met a departing car. The light

shone full into the drivers face and for a second I thought there was going to be a brush. But the cars cleared. As we passed, the man yelled something about "crazy hoodlums."

"Go peddle your noodles!" Ted yelled back.

The drive-in was surrounded by red and blue lights that ran around the eaves and over the ridgepole. Hawaiian music came from a pair of speakers mounted on the roof. Several cars were parked around the place and a car hop in a hula skirt was going from car to car taking orders and delivering trays.

"Let's go inside," Ted said. "We can hear the music better."

I counted with my fingers the change in my pocket. A placard on the front door read NO MINORS ALLOWED. Ted said, "I'm not a miner, I'm a tool-pusher," and swung the door open.

The man behind the counter wiping a glass on a towel gave us a long appraising look. Several boys I estimated to be no older than myself were playing the pinball machine. Ted led the way to a booth in the corner.

"Bring me an Oly, he told the waitress, who also wore a grass skirt, "and a pack of Camels."

"The same," Ron echoed. "Only leave off the Camels."

She hesitated. "You have id's?" She looked directly at me.

"Sure," Ted said, and produced his driver's license. Ron had already laid his license on the table.

I said, "I'll have a hot fudge Sundae."

The girl smiled faintly. "We don't serve ice cream."

I felt my face grow hot. "I'll take a coke," I said.

"Two Olys and a coke," she said, and went away.

Ted laid an arm across my shoulders. "Never mind, kid," he said. "I was once young myself."

I said, "Drinks are on me," and took a hand full of change from my pocket.

"We'll match," Ron said. "Tails lose." He took out his wallet that was filled with pictures of girls, behind the glassine windows. A sheaf of greenbacks showed in a side pocket. He laid a fifty-cent piece beside my quarter and Ted added a coin. Ron lost.

The waitress set two mugs of beer and a coke on the table and took a pack of Camels from her pocket.

"Atta girl," Ted said. "How about a date tomorrow night?"

"Sure," she said. "Don't forget to bring your pacifier."

Ron and I laughed. I took a sip of my coke and set the glass down. Ted had grown a mustache that made him look a little older, but she probably had us all pegged for what we were, a trio of high school punks. The girl herself, it occurred to me, looked almost as old as Mother does when

she's dressed up to go out and has her lipstick on.

I was surprised when Ron took a single sip of his beer and shoved the mug across. "I plumb forgot," he said. "I promised my old man I'd not imbibe even beer when I had the Continental out."

Still offended by the girl's slight, Ted poured half of Ron's brew into his own container and passed the remainder to me. "Drink up," he said. "Let's get out of this crumby joint."

A blue Dodge pulled up outside and the lights were switched off. The car resembled the Merrill Carsons' Dodge and I knew a moment of concern. The Carsons are good friends to my folks. But the man who emerged from the driver's side was not Merrill and was a trifle tipsy, as was the one who followed.

"Winos," Ron said. "They use beer as a chaser."

Impressed by Ron's rejection of the beer, I recalled my father's admonition to stay out of places with NO MINORS signs on the door. He's got no use for businesses that don't hold with the law. This wasn't the first time I'd crossed the threshold with Ron and Ted. But I couldn't very well hang back, I reasoned, without being thought of as a spoil-sport.

The beer tasted bitter after the sweet coke, but I drank it down.

Ted reached the car first. He got in beside Ron again and turned the radio on. I climbed into the back. The

fresh air smelled good after the smoke inside. I felt slightly nauseated and a little sleepy. When we reached I-5, Ron swung into the center lane. It was three-lane now all the way home. Grumpy still about the waitress's snub, Ted put his feet on the dashboard. "Open her up," he ordered Ron. "See what she'll do."

The car leapt forward and smoothed out, making a purring sound. We passed an Olds and Ted lighted an M-80 and tossed it to the pavement. The man in the Olds yelled something just before the device exploded and Ted yelled back.

"It's rained here," I said. "The pavement's wet." I had had the Chev skid once on a wet road, and all but somersaulted.

"Scared back there?" Ted asked.

"No," I said, and settled back. I wondered sometimes why Ron kowtowed to Ted. Ron was a good deal smarter, in school and out. But Ted was a bigger wheel.

We ran into a drizzle and Ron started the windshield wipers. The tires hissed on the wet pavement. A few yards ahead the road was so black you could scarcely see the line markers. Ron pushed the spot button and the highway lit up all the way to the divider.

We must all have seen the woman at the same instant. She had negotiated the first lane and was running to get across the second ahead of an oncoming semi. She was looking back at the truck in the lane she had just crossed as though

she didn't see the Lincoln or as though she was temporarily blinded by the spot.

Ted and I both yelled, "Look out!" and Ron hit the brake. The wheels locked and the car went into a skid and the tires squalled. As she entered the center lane ahead of the Lincoln, directly in its path, the spot fell full on her face.

She stopped as though paralyzed, then turned and took a few steps directly toward us, like a blinded rabbit.

At the moment of impact, which didn't seem much, the Lincoln left the pavement and veered along the soft shoulder and then headed for a bank of earth the road construction men had left. The bumper struck the bank and the car stopped with a jerk that threw me against the front seat.

I picked myself up off the floor. Ted crept from underneath the dash. Ron sat huddled over the steering wheel, his wind gone. The motor was still running, purring as smoothly as ever.

"Did you hit her?" Ted managed.

"I don't know," Ron said. "God, I hope not."

Kneeling on the back seat, I tried to see through the window, blurred by rain. Down the road a way, the semi had come to a halt.

Getting his wind back, Ron shifted all at once into reverse. The wheels spun and caught. The car shot in reverse back to the highway and headed south.

Ted shouted, "No! Ron!" I flung myself over Ron's shoulder and tried frantically to reach the ignition.

Ron braked again and shut off the motor. "I didn't mean to," he said. His voice was little more than a whisper. "I lost my head." His face, illuminated by the dome light when he opened the car door, was dead white.

The truck driver was running across the lane, a flashlight in his hand. The light shone squarely on the crumpled figure. She lay face down a little way off the road where she had fallen. When the trucker turned her over I recoiled. I heard Ron, or Ted, make a small noise behind me.

The trucker arose and turned his light on us and then on the Lincoln license plate. "I would say killed instantly," he said quietly. "Which one's the driver?"

For a moment no one spoke. Then Ron said, "I had the wheel."

"Your car?"

"My father's."

"Who is?"

"George Blackaby."

The trucker fished a pencil and a pad from his pocket and wrote the name and turned to Ted and me. A car coming at a fast clip down the center lane slowed and stopped as the trucker swung his light.

A man got out and stared sickly at the woman. A second car, the Olds we had passed, pulled to the shoulder.

"They did this!" the driver shouted. "They belong to be hanged!"

"Let's not lose our heads," the trucker said. "Turn your flashers on." He addressed the driver of the number one car. "Go to the nearest telephone. Call an ambulance and the patrol office. My radio's not working."

He turned to us again to ask if we had a flashlight, Ron nodded.

"Turn your flashers on. Get your flashlight and go out there and stop any car that approaches. Start swinging your light as soon as you see a car coming. I'll do the same as soon as I've found something to cover the body.

A half hour later, I sat in the brightly-lighted outer office at patrol headquarters, waiting. I had repeated my name and age and my father's name and address and our telephone number, to the man behind the desk, who was still writing between phone calls, and had waited with Ron and Ted.

Ron had been called first. Ted and I had sat on the bench, silent. And then I sat alone, thinking and trying not to think, seeing in memory the broken figure underneath the truck driver's blanket, and trying not to see. It had been a relief finally to enter the patrol car, with Ted and Ron. We sat side by side in the back, Ron with his face in his hands, I had held my own jaw firm to keep my teeth from chattering and had tried to hold down the gorge that kept rising in my throat.

The man at the desk, I was sure, had called Mr. Blackaby, and likely Ted's, and my folks. I visualized my father at the bedside phone, listening asking questions, and mother's anxious, "What is it, Jess?"

I became aware that my name had been called and that the man behind the desk was looking at me. "You may go in now."

Inside the inner office, I looked around quickly and ascertained that I was alone save for the uniformed patrolman, who nodded at the chair across his desk and then went back to his perusal of the big opened book before him. I sat on the chair's edge.

"Your name?" the officer looked up presently to ask.

"Carl Wallerich."

"Your age?"

"Fifteen"

"Your father's name?"

I hesitated momentarily, wishing that I didn't have to tell, Although I had told, of course, already.

"Jess Wallerich."

"Jess Wallerich, The attorney?"

"Yes, Sir."

"I think your father's been notified," the other said, laying his pencil down. "Now, I'd like a complete account of the accident. In your own words." He sounded non-committal.

"Try not to leave anything out."

He interrupted only once. "Just a minute. How fast would you say you were going before your friend braked." His sharp eyes looked directly into mine.

Once more I hesitated. "I'm not sure, Sir." I really didn't know for sure. The last time I had looked, the hand had pointed to 70. That was when I had said the pavement was wet. I thought probably Ron had increased a bit afterward.

"You wouldn't hazard a guess?"

I thought about it. "No, Sir," I said finally.

"Your friends are sure you were going 55. Does that sound right to you?"

"I expect so," I said miserably. Ted and Ron both knew we were doing more than 55. I remembered how Ted had prodded Ron to increase the speed. A moment after I had lied about the speed, I felt that my interrogator knew that I was lying.

"One thing more," the officer said. "Did you have any liquor in the car?" Again the keen eyes scanned my face.

"No, Sir," I said quickly. I thought of the beer at the drive-in. I could still smell it on Ted's breath when we sat on the bench outside. And I could still taste it in my own mouth. But we hadn't taken any along.

The patrolman seemed to be waiting for me to add

something. "Did you stop for any liquor along the way?"

"We bought a couple of beers at a place. But Ron... Blackaby, the driver, didn't drink any. The other guy and I drank his share. He had ordered one but decided not to drink it because he was driving."

"I see," said the patrolman. "Thanks for being honest."

There was a knock at the door and he went to the door and opened it. I heard Mr. Blackaby's voice. I wanted Father to be there, in a way. But I wanted him not to be, too. I didn't want to face him yet.

The patrolman turned back into the room. "Your father is here," he said. "You may go now. We'll be contacting you later."

I walked ahead of him out into the ante-room, where Father waited.

It was near daylight when Father and I left the patrol office. The sky was gray and overcast and a wind whined around the corner of the building. We had waited in silence in the outer office while Ron's father and mine were closeted with the patrolman, who had been unable to contact Ted's folks. Then we had been called back in and asked essentially the same questions in the presence of our fathers and each other. The officer in charge had not asked again how fast we were going.

Father and I walked a little way apart, neither

of us speaking. At the parking lot, Father said, "Wait in the car, will you, Carl? I want to speak to Mr. Blackaby." I couldn't help noticing that Father needed a shave. His face looked tired and drawn in the gray light and he had on his pajama top underneath his jacket. Obviously he had not waited to comb his hair, which he wore a little longer now. Mr. Blackaby had gone back up the steps into the patrol office and was just emerging. The two met on the sidewalk and stood talking together.

Ron sat in the front seat of Mrs. Blackaby's Lincoln, which was even newer than her husband's and had more gadgets and more chrome trimming. Ted sat in the back, looking smaller, because of his posture. His hat, with its wilted feather, hung wetly about his ears. Neither looked up as I passed.

I waited in the car, thinking of how Father had looked, standing there in the patrol office in his house shoes, his pajama top open at the throat. In contrast, Mr. Blackaby had worn a shirt and a necktie. I remembered, too, how Mr. Blackaby had talked to the patrolman, as though he were pleading a case in court. He had talked about the rain and the lack of visibility, and had said he wondered, why on earth, the woman would attempt to cross the freeway on such a night.

Father hadn't said much. He had allowed Mr. Blackaby to do most of the talking. He had asked some questions, such as whether the woman had any relatives and had they been

notified. He hadn't mentioned me or the other boys.

Presently Father came and got in beside me. He started the car without speaking; and drove slowly out of the lot, over the wet streets and through the overpass to the freeway entrance. A few miles out; the Blackaby Lincoln passed us without the horn sounding. Mr. Blackaby raised his hand, and Father responded.

The Lincoln was out of sight in minutes. The Chev seemed to be the only car on the road. After having glanced once at Father's face, I stared straight ahead through the rain-drenched windshield. In the faint light from the dash, Father's face had looked hardly familiar.

He must have felt my eyes on him; for he said presently, "I'm glad you told the truth, Son." He turned and looked at me briefly. "You did, didn't you?"

I nodded. But his eyes were back on the road again.

I thought of the searching way in which the officer behind the desk had regarded me. Well, I didn't know; actually, that we weren't going 55. I hadn't been watching the speedometer at the moment of impact or when Ron was braking.

"The truck driver said he probably couldn't have seen the woman either," Father said. "He said the pavement was too wet for a quick stop, and that Ron had tried. The tire marks proved this."

I wondered what miracle had kept the man in the

Olds from coming in to testify. Maybe he would be at the hearing if there was to be one. I remembered how he had shouted, "They belong to be hanged!" I lived through it all again; as I had in the waiting room, felt the light impact, saw the woman's scared-rabbit face.

"Mr. Blackaby doesn't think there will be any trouble," Father went on to say. "He thinks you'll all get off with a strong lecture. Ron's license may be revoked for a time."

He waited, as though for me to speak. He thinks we all ought to be punished some way, I reflected. He was probably blaming me and Ted about equally with Ron... It would all be in the papers tomorrow. I wondered how they would handle it, and thought uneasily about the man in the Olds and the M-80 Ted had thrown.

"Mr. Blackaby seems to feel it's fortunate that the woman has no known survivors," Father went on to say. "There'll likely be no one to press for charges."

One of the Chev's lights, I noticed, was not very bright and they both seemed to be focused a little high. They shone on the moonglow bushes beside the freeway and the leaves looked white and frosty.

"How do you feel about that?" Father asked.

If I had been at the wheel, if the Lincoln had been the Chev; Father would never have gone to bat for me, the way Mr. Blackaby had for Ron. He wouldn't, for sure, have said

that about it being fortunate that the woman had no survivors who might press for charges, or even have thought of such a thing. Of course Mr. Blackaby would not have made this observation in the presence of the patrol people. That was talk between colleagues.

I didn't know how I felt about that. I didn't want to decide. I just wanted to wake up in the morning and find that the whole evening had been a nightmare. I didn't feel so good about the speed part. But if I had told the officer the entire truth, I might have gotten Ron into serious trouble.

How did you decide what to do? You had to stand by your friends; or you wouldn't have any friends. If I had said, "around 80," which I thought about right, Ron might have been charged with negligent homicide. I would have felt like a stoolie then. If I had been at the wheel, would I have confessed to speeding?

Obviously, Father had stopped expecting an answer to his question about how I felt. He had his eyes on the road, and his face looked grim in the half light; his jaw set, the way it always was when he was displeased with something I had done.

The rain had stopped and there was a small rift in the clouds. Under the lights the pavement looked dry. But when a bus passed, the tires made a hissing sound. I realized all at once that we were approaching the scene of the accident. The sign for the exit to the drive-in, with the hula girl, flash-

ed on and off. The car in the right lane ahead signaled for the turn.

I wondered whether there would be blood stains on the pavement. Would there still be tire marks where Ron had skidded, in an effort to avoid the woman; or would the rain have washed it all away?

I remembered suddenly that as a small boy, I had crept into Father's bed when there was thunder and lightning, to hide my face in Father's pajama coat. And that was what I wanted to do now, to hide my face against him until we had passed the place.

But I sat still and waited.

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