

Sidney Thompson

Down Time

Cooper was deep in Chrysler product, where you never saw anyone who wasn't showing a vehicle or, like him, going in to pull one out. Being far enough away from customer parking and the main driving lanes to be considered remote. You wouldn't stake out a spot back here to catch an up, but Brandi, even newer to Hank Hood Automall than he was, appeared to be doing just that, between two Town & Country minivans.

"Nice tie," she said as he passed.

"Yeah, it's my conversation piece." He smiled but was still miffed by his whole initiation—his fifty-dollar tie scissored right in half in the morning meeting simply because he'd sold his first car last night, or half a car. A split deal. Big deal!

He walked to the end of the row, where the PT Cruisers were parked, and when he saw the Opal Metallic was practically as iridescent as a mood ring in the sunlight, he got hopeful that the Hadleys might feel different about the color today. He wanted a whole deal today.

He leaned against the car to unlock the lockbox and glanced back in Brandi's direction, catching her looking at him before darting her attention elsewhere, swinging tight blonde curls. He could finally, for a second, take her in: the bare arms, the low, ruffled top, the snug capri pants, the calves, the heels. Dressed for success.

All right, he told himself, focusing on the lockbox, then on the key inside it, he could do this. He could go up to KFC right now and win Claude over and close him down. He cranked the engine, then when he pulled out of the space, Brandi jogged over to him in tiny skittering steps with her hands balled up close to her breasts.

He stopped to see what she wanted, and it took him a moment to locate the switch to lower his window, forgetting at first that the controls weren't on the doors but on the dash.

"Where you going?" she asked.

"KFC," he said, and before he could explain, she said she was going with him and bounced around the front bumper to the passenger side.

As soon as she was in and had shut her door, she dropped her seat to full recline and squirmed as low as she could, her top riding up on her midriff, revealing a yellow-jeweled navel ring.

"I don't think they'll be open yet, though," she said.

"No, probably not," he said. He rested his hand on the gear-shift knob and hit the gas. He could act cool like the next guy. He didn't have to know everything. "But my customer's a manager there," he felt he needed to explain. "I guess opening up," he said, tooling past the point, where the other salesmen milled for business, shooting the shit.

Once on Highway 98 and out of view of anyone on the lot, Brandi popped her seat upright and straightened her top. "Take your time. I gotta have a minute." She reached toward the floorboard and came back with her lighter, a Phillies Blunt she'd bought that morning on the way to work, a dime bag she'd bought off Demarcus in Detail five minutes ago, and a razor blade, which Detail always had plenty of. Demarcus was a friend of hers from when she worked at Hank Hood before her incarceration. She was glad to be out and back, of course. He wondered why she was explaining all of this to him.

Cooper watched her remove the thin cigar from its cellophane sleeve, then bring the cigar to her mouth, running

her tongue up and down its side. She glanced at him, and he looked away to watch the road.

“I hadn’t sold in so long, I shouldn’t be doing this,” she said, “but I just gotta relax a little, you know, and then I’ll be all right.” She held the cigar in her left hand, butt up, then with the razor blade in her right, with surgical precision, she began slicing the leaf wrapper, down to the tip.

KFC was coming up, so he slowed, and as he passed he spotted the Oldsmobile Alero parked in the back. So Claude was there. He was there.

Cooper pressed his foot against the pedal to speed up again, and now watching Brandi lay the razor blade on her thigh, then cradle the cigar in both hands, Cooper couldn’t resist any longer. “What are you doing?”

“What do you mean?” she said absently as she gently pulled the incision open with her thumbs to expose the tobacco. Then, as an afterthought, she turned to look at him. “You never smoked a blunt before?”

He shook his head, and she smiled.

“Wow, really? But you smoke, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “Not in awhile, but sure.”

She looked forward, then nodded at the BP coming up. “Pull over a sec.”

Cooper turned into the gas station and parked far away from the pumps. Brandi opened her door, and he looked around nervously as she held the cigar outside, and with her thumb slipped inside the leaf wrapper, she began carefully raking the tobacco out.

“All right,” she said, shutting her door, “just gimme another minute, then we can do whatcha gotta do.”

Cooper pulled back onto 98, still heading south, out of Fairhope now, to mostly trees and rolling land. They actually weren’t very far from the house in Point Clear Stables Leah wanted them to buy, so he took a right at the next street to cut over to it. With the deft finger movements of a clarinetist, Brandi sifted away the stems and seeds,

dropping them back into the baggie, while crumbling the pot into the leaf wrapper. He didn't explain where they were going, and she didn't seem to care.

When the next road graded upward past the cow pasture, with the cows grazing near the fence, he said, "Cows." He didn't know why he wanted her to see them, but she was nice enough to lift her head long enough to let him see her look and smile, before finishing up, and she was so close. "Just gotta roll it up, lick it up, and burn it up," she said.

He paused as he turned on Polo Ridge Boulevard and pointed out the golf course through the trees. "See the golf course?" he said.

She looked, and still licking the blunt, she nodded. "Cool."

"You think so?"

She lowered her face and searched between her legs for her lighter. "Yeah, you don't?"

He shrugged. "My wife wants a house down here, like bad," he said. They passed the gate house and the pond and bridge, while Brandi, holding the blunt by two fingertips, ran the flame of her lighter up and down the length of the incision.

He circled the neighborhood, then stopped in front of the blond-brick house with the For Sale sign posted in the yard. "That's it," he said.

"Pretty," she said, holding the blunt loosely in one hand. She set the razor blade in the baggie and the baggie on the floorboard, then tugged the handle of her door. "Let's check it out."

He scouted his potential neighbors. It was desolately quiet. "Around here," he said, leading her off the walkway, through the yard and an unlocked gate, to a patio garden.

"Ah, this is awesome," she said, spinning, soaking it up.

"Not too much, huh?"

She shook her head and backed up to the house, leaning out of view of the street and letting her hair nestle against the bricks. Then she put the blunt to her lips and lit it.

Cooper walked up to the window Leah had peaked through the last time they were here together. The pale-yellow archways and high ceilings and columns said elegant decadence.

Brandi snorted, fighting to hold the smoke in her lungs, then stretched out her arm to pass the blunt.

He hesitated, thinking maybe later, but maybe he needed to relax now, too, so he took it, an easy thing to pass, and took a hit.

She released her smoky breath in a gush, then reached for the blunt. “What’s your name?”

He released his breath and coughed. “Cooper,” he said.

“Never been arrested, have you?”

Cooper shook his head.

“Been to college?”

“Been there,” he nodded.

She smiled, and her eyes were green and gold and blue and brown, and on fire. Then she closed them sleepily as she took a long drag. Then he took one last hit before she took her last hit, and then she put the ember out against a brick.

“So, you wanna go inside? Is that it?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” he said, realizing what she was asking, unsure if that was what he wanted. “Do you?”

“Sure,” she said. “I’m on the pill. You don’t have AIDS, do you?”

He laughed. “No, don’t have AIDS.”

“Because you’re married?”

He showed her his ring. "I'm married."

"Or I could just suck you off out here under these palm trees. It's so nice out here. What a life!" She opened her arms and spun around as if to dance with the entire subdivision.

Leah had dismissed his overtures for sex when they'd found the window unlocked. Why was he married to Leah and contemplating anything more with her by buying this house? Why was he leaning back in the shade of a bay window and dropping his pants? Why did the palm fronds tick when they touched? Why did he have to lose half a tie?