

Scarlet 47, by Jakub Kujawa

It was late into the night when the old Cadillac strolled, unnoticed, into the diner's parking lot. Much like the building it was standing next to now, the car wasn't much to look at; black metallic paint, treated harshly by time, was peeling off in big chunks, unveiling the car's scars, full of rust and dents.

The driver turned the headlights off, but the engine was still running.

It sounded like an old American V8 should sound, but it did form a sort of contrast with the bodywork - it ran smooth, raw and powerful, ready to fire away the massive sedan at any given moment, straight into the night's peril.

Or so, at least, thought John, the diner's owner. He didn't feel like sleeping that night, and his senses were sharp enough to hear the car when it was just under a mile away. It was probably more due to the vastness of Nebraskan plains, not the man's hearing; he was anything but young, and healthy.

Despite that, his mind hadn't lost its edge over the years - the almost complete lack of visitors taught him to pay attention to every little detail of every single person that passed through his property.

But this was the first time he had visitors at night. As a native, he always knew that it was just common sense, not some rare, unexplainable occurrence - it was, overall, dangerous to drive through the plains at night. Not because of ghosts that were said to roam the vast fields, or various criminal gangs that found the enormously huge, empty spaces advantageous to their businesses.

Simply put, the Great Plains of Nebraska were boring.

Even the most skilled drivers would rather avoid driving through them at night, with the increased risk of falling asleep at the wheel in mind - even when the worst thing that could happen was steering out of the way into a fence, be it metal or wooden.

With the car windows all tinted, and the night nearing its peak, he could not tell, even roughly, who was driving the car. There was a single, curious thing that he managed to spot, just as the car gently strayed from the main road - it had Florida license plates.

John's mind was racing, just as any Nebraskan's mind would in a situation like this. It was the equivalent of a New Yorker spotting a flying dish from his apartment's terrace on the Upper East Side - not a common occurrence, to say the least.

With the engine still running, John was debating, inside his head, whether to take a risk and go out into the parking lot, find out what exactly is happening, or wait it out, see how it plays out on its own.

It really wasn't a hard choice for someone who gets to see someone that's not him only once a week or so. He slowly moved down the stairs from his tiny apartment to his workplace, and neared the main entrance, now getting a better look at the stranger.

The better look that didn't really change anything, as the porch light made barely any difference. On the contrary, the car seemed to be darker than it was seen from upstairs.

He just assumed that it's his mind, playing tricks on him.

John, as quiet as he could manage, opened the fly door, and then the main door of his diner.

It was cold outside, way colder than he remembered from a few hours ago. He stepped outside, his every movement a demonstration of being unsure about what he's doing. The car seemed to grow larger, but, again

he blamed it on his old, perfidious mind that loved to play tricks on him and everyone around him.

He hid behind one of the gas barrels, lined up halfway between the door and the car.

He began to feel more and more uneasy. He was far from calm a few moments before, but he could swear that with every footstep, things inside and around him got more and more... odd.

The Cadillac was just a few feet away from John, and the engine's sound was more and more... present?

He could feel it, with his whole body. He could feel it through the barrels, which were trembling, as he just noticed, from the car's constant growl.

John waited, sitting in the cold that he no longer felt. It was something he never felt before.

Yet, after some time passed and he could no longer tell what time it was, until he noticed the first, gentle lights of dawn, John came to a conclusion that the feeling was familiar, in a very unsettling way.

Hours had passed, but momentarily, without a scent of hesitation, he rose from behind the barrels, filled with something that could be called courage under normal circumstances, and in that exact moment, when his eyes towards were he hoped to meet the stranger's gaze, the engine shut down. There was no one behind the wheel.

Puzzlement ensued, as John quickly circled the now silent car, instinctively looking for something, someone.

He stopped after what seemed like a solid few minutes, and then, without being aware of what's happening, he howled, and it was a long, mournful sound that carried across the wheat fields, alarming everyone in its dreadful range.

Excluding the figure that stood in the doorway that John has passed through a few hours ago, now staring directly at him. John noticed the gaze momentarily.

The character's eyes were of no particular color at first sight, but as he kept on looking, they glimmered in black and dark red and blue and green and purple and orange and...

The colors seemed to take over him, and he didn't notice when the figure moved, from the doorway to just a few inches away in front of him.

They stared at each other for what seemed like both a moment and eternity.

The character was slightly taller, without even a modest expression on his pale gaunt face.

„We have met before, have we not?“ he asked in a low, surprisingly warm voice.

John suddenly regained his mind's clarity, as if someone broke off a chain that has kept him locked inside of himself.

„I do not think so, sir. Where is it you think we've met?“ he replied with a question, trying to sound at least as warm as the stranger.

The character was surprised by the reply, though it was only a slight expression, a shade of a one, that beamed through his face. The reaction surprised him even more, and he briefly looked over to the east, towards the former village of Lancaster, and gave a sorrowful grin, as if to himself.

He turned back to John.

„It is not my custom to go where I'm not wanted,“ he stated and, not waiting for a reply, started walking towards his car, „I think all of you waited for this moment for far too long and I am afraid you will not enjoy it as much as you thought you would.“

The old Nebraskan was confused, his eyes piercing the figure, demanding a reply.

“Is this all supposed to mean..?“ he asked faintly, once he began to fathom what was happening.

The wind surged, now blowing in the old man's back.

The figure turned to him, for the last time.

“Look to the east. This all happened before.“

John closed his eyes, and the wind began to blow even stronger.

He heard the engine

come back to life,

but he did not hear the screech of the tires nor the rattling of the cinder.

Just the engine, screaming towards the west, it's rage

fading, slowly.

He opened his eyes, and looked to the east.

The sun was up in its full glory, just over the horizon.

He fell to his knees, and wept as the distant sphere of the deepest shade of darkness

slowly rose over everyone and everything, growing

brighter, stronger.

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