The Orange Car

The fridge had stopped working again. Stupid piece of crap. I kicked it, hoping the movement would jolt it into action. The only thing I accomplished was a stubbed toe. I grabbed a beer out of the fridge- might as well drink it while it’s cold- and collapsed on the couch. The couch was so old that the foam showed more than the fabric, but it was somewhere to sit. And it’s not like I could just go to Target and buy a new one.

The shades were drawn tight against the sun, but it was still hot. I’d just woken up, so I guess it was late afternoon. I checked the clock. Five thirty. Fine. I didn’t have anything in particular to do, not until later. I had a meeting at seven, but it wasn’t too far from here.

There was no reason to be awake during the heat of the day now that I didn’t have to wake up for work. I’d gotten laid off a week ago. The whole store closed- not enough customers in the city anymore, at least not the kind that shopped at Target. I hadn’t minded too much- I had other ways of getting by. And there was still a TotalMart, so there was at least somewhere legitimate to shop. Everything else could be done through the black market.

I didn’t have much food in my fridge but I figured I’d better eat whatever was there before it rotted. Just some Walmart brand white bread that I’d found unopened on the street- two weeks past its expiration date but still looked okay- and some mustard.

I wolfed down some of the bread and mustard, the combination unpleasant but at least it was food. I’d need to pick something up tonight. Maybe I’d stop by Target, collect the stuff I’d left there.

I peeked out the window. The sun was strong, but it was late enough that it didn’t burn. The sky was bright pink and orange, almost mesmerizingly beautiful. The sunsets were striking these days- they said it was a side effect of the pollution.
The bread and mustard and beer weren’t sitting too well in my stomach. I tried the faucet to get some water. The stuff that trickled out - brown, silty - didn’t look much like water. I had another beer instead. I’d have to get my hands on a water filter one of these days.

When six thirty rolled around I finally got ready to go out - the bra I’d stolen from work (a little ripped from where I’d torn off the security tag but otherwise the nicest undergarment I owned), jeans, t-shirt, sweater, mask, backpack. I hated wearing those thick layers but it was better not to expose too much skin to the sunlight, even in the evening. Not to mention the unwanted attention that came with exposed skin.

I undid the airlock on the door with care - it was cheap and old and I probably couldn’t afford another one - and walked down the stairs. There was another airlock on the front door, but it’d been broken for months. Some idiot had broken it in a hurry to get out and the piece of shit landlord wouldn’t replace it.

I walked down the streets slowly. Garbage was piled on the sidewalks, waiting in vain to be carted off. The budget cuts were no joke, and it’d been a few weeks since the trash had been picked up. Maybe the garbage men were on strike or something, I hadn’t really been keeping up with the news. Either way, I was just glad I couldn’t smell through the mask.

The streets were nearly empty, the sun still too hot for most people. I’d only walked a few blocks, already sweating heavily - why had I worn my nice bra? - when I spotted a car driving slowly down the street behind me. I frowned underneath my mask. It was a gas car, pretty rare these days now that most of the gas stations had closed. I’d heard you could get petroleum cheaper on the black market, but prices were still through the roof. Anybody who had that kind of money could just take one of the trains out of here, go live in a bubble.
I didn’t have a good feeling about the car. Even before the oil ran out, it would have attracted attention- it was one of those retro cars from the twentieth century, and orange. Anyone who drove that wasn’t scared to be seen, even wanted to be seen. I ducked into an alley, walked through to the other side. They probably weren’t looking for me if they were that important but I didn’t want to risk it.

Jade was waiting in the arranged place, on a bench by the river. I sat down next to her and stared at the Hudson. It was brown, glistening with oil and spotted with discarded debris of the city- doll heads, water bottles, plastic bags, condoms. Looked more or less the same color and consistency as chocolate milk. Basically the same stuff that came out of my faucet.

“What d’you get?” Her voice was tinny through the mask, an artificial whine. She sounded much better face to face.

I pulled the bag out of my jacket and handed it to her, trying to seem casual. There was a couple people walking around the river area that I didn’t want to notice anything.

“Shit, is this what I think it is?” Jade looked at the sticky black lump with wonder, prodded at it through the bag “Haven’t had smack in months.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t easy to get either.” It actually wasn’t too hard to get. Just a few minutes in the stockroom with Dave. It was gross, but it wasn’t the worst thing I’d done since the air turned.

“What do you want for it?” The queasy sensation was back in my stomach. I knew it wasn’t good to sell drugs to addicts, but I had to eat too. And maybe they were getting some peace, some relaxation out of it. God knows they weren’t going to find that anywhere else.

“What do you have?”
Jade pulled out three chocolate bars. Hershey’s with almonds. I could feel myself salivating.

“What else? I can’t live off chocolate.”

She handed me something, wrapped in plastic.

“What’s this?” I turned it over. A few bars of something.

“Meal bars. Each one is enough for a day.”

“Okay, fine. We’re good.” I said casually, trying to hide my enthusiasm. There were about six- enough to eat for a week. And they’d last forever. A good backup, just in case you needed to stay inside and hide out for a while.

Jade nodded, shoved the bag of heroin in her pocket.

“See you later then. I’ll let you know when I need something again.”

“Okay, bye.” I said, but Jade had already started walking away. I couldn’t help but feel a little wistful. Jade and I had been close once, kind of. Now I was more a drug dealer than a friend. But there was no point in sitting on this shitty, rotting bench and feeling sad about it. There would be plenty of time for reminiscing and wallowing later, when I was safely at home.

I walked off in the opposite direction from Jade, head down, staring at the dried out grass beneath my feet. Summer had stretched on forever, and what little moisture had once inhabited this lawn was long gone by, what was it- September? Soon enough the weather would get cold and the storms would start. The grass would probably enjoy a few weeks of rejuvenating water before being wiped out by the snow.

I decided to stop by the Target on my way back. It wasn’t too far out of the way, and I needed to get to my stash before someone else did. I walked the twelve blocks as quickly as the heat would allow, still wary of being followed. The food I carried was valuable, and I didn’t doubt that there were plenty of people who would happily take it from me.
The Target loomed ahead of me. It looked to be in decent shape since the closing, not burned or anything. I walked around the back. The window was ten feet off the ground, the lock rusty. I dragged a couple crates together and climbed on top, wobbling precariously. I pulled the lock roughly and it opened. Thank god. I was worried they’d replaced it with something that would actually keep people out. I opened the window and heaved myself in, not without difficulty. Upper arm strength definitely wasn’t my strong suit, and I was slightly sore and sweaty by the time I managed to gain entry. I lowered myself gingerly onto the shelves below and closed the window behind me. Hopefully no one would see the crates and follow.

The motion activated lights still worked okay. They flickered on and off but I could still see where I was going. The aisles were mostly empty, a result of the huge sales we’d had in the last few weeks. But management hadn’t bothered to collect what we didn’t sell- the company didn’t want to risk sending trucks into the city. They had a habit of making it back much worse for the wear, if they made it back at all.

The stuff that was leftover was the stuff no one else wanted, mostly. Plastic toys, out of date DVDs, party balloons. The food was more or less gone, only a few odd items remaining. I grabbed what was there- a glass jar of maraschino cherries, a couple cans of diced black olives, cooking spray, a pack of unrefrigerated imitation cheese. A container of fish oil pills. A box of black licorice. I took what I could get, I couldn’t afford to be too picky.

The storeroom in the back was more plentiful. I found a stash of food I’d tucked away in the last weeks, mercifully untouched by the other employees. Packs of chips, can after can of vegetables and fruit and fish. Most of them were only a month of two out of date- too old to sell but safe enough to eat. I’d been able to hide them after they got taken off the shelves, before they
were discarded. I took all I could fit in my backpack, putting the rest back in a hiding place in a broken dresser.

I didn’t have any room left in my backpack, but I tucked some books under my arm on the way out. These hadn’t sold well in the last few weeks and I had my pick. I grabbed some cheap mysteries, some old classics. I needed something to distract myself with during the long hot hours of sunlight.

I struggled back out the window, making sure to replace the broken lock and dismantle the crates. I wanted this source to stay untouched for as long as possible.

I walked home more slowly, weighed down with my spoils. The streets were more crowded now that things had cooled down. The stores and restaurants were just starting to open, the ones that were left anyway. Most of the big chains had left, decided the city was too risky, the politics too corrupt, the people too poor. The only thing left was the TotalMart. Those things never closed.

There was supposed to be a plan to build a dome over the city, start filtering the air. But then a new election happened and the plan sort of fell away, and everyone said that masks were the new solution. Back in those days, it wasn’t so hard to breathe without a mask. Sure, you’d cough and get headaches, but your lungs wouldn’t get burned. The dome thing seemed like a long shot anyway, so no one made too much of a fuss.

A couple years back though, it got worse. It wasn’t clear exactly what happened. Best I could make out, the TotalCorp facility in Queens had a big leak. Of course, TotalCorp blamed in on global warming. Either way, it got dangerous to walk around without a mask after that. The government gave them out at first, but then they ran out of money. I had to buy mine. I was one of the lucky ones, though- some people couldn’t afford them, and for a few months after the air
turned, the hospitals were packed with people coughing up blood. There wasn’t much they could do for them though—without a mask, you couldn’t go outside, or you died.

Anyone who could afford it didn’t have to deal with stuff like that, they just up and moved to somewhere outside the city, somewhere with cleaner air or somewhere that had a filtered dome. My friend Mariah had moved to a bubble after a couple years of slumming it in the city. I couldn’t blame her for leaving. I would too, if I could. I hadn’t heard from her much since, though, and I wondered how her bubble life was going lately. They didn’t encourage communication between the bubble and the city too much, it was too dangerous—not to mention the connection here was notoriously unreliable. A couple times Mariah was able to send me an email by disguising her IP address enough to fool the server. It sounded nice out there, a lot nicer than New York. I tried to make my life seem exciting and edgy rather than grimy in my responses. I’m not sure I succeeded.

I got home, exhausted. I immediately stripped off my heavy clothes and dropped the backpack on the ground. I could sort through my bounty later. I collapsed on the couch, drifting into a light, uneasy sleep. I kept hearing sounds outside, imagining a fight, someone being murdered, tossing the body in the trunk of a car. I awoke, damp with sweat, to the sound of a knock on my door. I pulled on a shirt and padded over the the door. Through the mask I could see the mass of dark curly hair. Naomi. I opened the airlock and let her in.

She stripped off the mask immediately, her face shiny with sweat. I wrapped my arms around her. “You okay? How long did it take you to get here?”
“It’s crazy out there. It took me like thirty minutes. There were all these riots, or something, and I kept detouring around them. God, it’s fucking hot.” Naomi sat down on the couch, pulled out a half empty bottle of spiced rum. “Found this if you want some.”

“What were they rioting?” I took a swig of the rum, craving a buzz. I’d felt too sober all day, despite the two beers in the morning.

“I don’t know, why not? The whole city’s gone to shit. Police are gone, mayor’s gone, guess they know enough to get the hell out of here. The rest of us, we’re not going anywhere, might as well start some fires, I guess.”

“Want some chocolate?” I offered. Naomi took half the bar, looking at it with a kind of reverence.

“Where’d you get it?”

“I traded some stuff.” I couldn’t bring myself tell Naomi about the drugs, or the way I’d gotten them. I didn’t know how to explain the thing with Dave- it was just a transaction, but I didn’t know if she’d understand.

The booze and chocolate softened the edges of the conversation, made it easier to ignore the riots happening outside. She reached for my hand, and we came together, both of us tasting like sugar and alcohol. It was the quickest way to forget about mortality.

But the fear rushed back soon after. We lay on the couch, intertwined despite the heat, and I felt a wave of anxiety about the future. I guess we’d just stay in the city, make our way somehow, escape if we could find the money for it. Naomi could move in if she wanted, she lived in a worse shithole than I did, and maybe I could get a legit job again.
I couldn’t help thinking that this was all a fantasy, that even if the two of us did make it out, we were all doomed anyway. Whatever news that was showing these days showed images of storms and floods and uncontrollable fires in between commercials for lipstick and potato chips. The watery edges of the city would creep inwards until only the roofs of buildings would be left dry. The sun would get even hotter and more punishing. I lay on the couch, feeling small and sweaty and powerless. I barely even know how to fix my own life, much less the whole world.

Naomi looked so peaceful sleeping, more peaceful than I’d seen anyone in a while. Her breathing was regular and calm. I got up, careful not to wake her, and grabbed the bottle of rum. There was still a bit left, and I chugged it. One more way to forget.

I crept back to the couch and lay down, accidentally waking Naomi.

“Hey.”

“Hey, how long was I out?”

“Not too long, it’s just about midnight.”

“Shit, I’d better leave, I have a morning shift.” She got up slowly, regretfully.

“Okay.” I glanced at my backpack, still untouched since I got back. “Do you need any food or anything? I got some stuff yesterday.”

“I’m all right, thanks though. I can get by. I’ll see you tomorrow though, right? Around the same time.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

We embraced for a brief moment and she left the apartment. I walked over to the window, the street lit only by one flickering streetlight. As I watched the street, waiting to see Naomi leave the building, the orange car pulled up to the side of the road and idled there. Shit. I felt a spike of adrenaline, unsure what to do. Were they here for me? I tried to make out the
driver’s face but it was too dark. Could it be a coincidence? Was it because of the drug dealing? I was so small time that I could barely believe anyone would take an interest.

But then Naomi emerged from the shadow of my building, crossed the street towards the car, got in the passenger seat. The car drove off into the streets, leaving behind a cloud of exhaust, and I was left confused, my head spinning from the alcohol. The rum suddenly felt sour in my mouth, and I ran to the bathroom and heaved into the toilet. I lay on the bathroom floor, panting, until I made myself get up and walk over to the couch. I had another deal early this morning, and I needed to get some sleep. I guess we all have to make some kind of compromises these days.