

# Nation

It was 8:36PM when I woke up in the passenger seat of an old two-seater Mitsubishi. Outside was dimly lit. We were going 95 and I could feel the car body shake as we barrelled forward up the highway.

"Finally awake?" grumbled a voice. I turned my head to the driver, a fat sack of shit with more facial hair than face. A tattered trucker hat covered his massive head. The brand, some breakfast restaurant. He was looking at me with a questionable grin, exposing the grotesque residue that had built up along his gingiva & teeth over years of carefully avoiding dental hygiene. "Looks like it," I finally replied. He laughed and turned his head to the road.

The car smelled horrible. The stench was filling my nose and making me sick. The ground was covered in brown paper bags, fast food ones. So many were sprawled out that you couldn't see the floor. I didn't know where I was. I rolled down the window to breathe, asking no questions.

Light poles lined the interstate route every mile or so, between them near complete darkness. Mountains were ahead in the distance and I could make out a big green sign as we passed it. Interstate 5. We were headed Northbound. My head hurt.

"Hey, so, look," he started. "I know we ain't supposed to be talking and all, but..." his eyes turned to me as he trailed. "What exactly did you do? Like, why do they want you so badly?" Such conviction. I had only just pieced together where I was, so I didn't respond, but his stare continued. 105 now. Speeding up.

To the right of me, cars zoomed. We passed one every few seconds. I looked down at my body. Winter coat and jeans. At least I was warm through all of this.

I decided I should say something.

"Who are you?" was the only thing I could think to say.

"Name's Jonah."

There was silence. I couldn't remember my name so I just nodded. Jonah looked confused. His eyes scanned me. The reflection of his retinas traced my face. Then, back to the road. We were quickly approaching the mountains.

As we sped along I began to recall some of the previous events. Bits and pieces, mostly in patches. I remembered being cuffed, bagged and beaten. I remembered being questioned.

"Grab me my reds." Jonah spoke. "They're in the glove compartment."

Without reaction I opened it and passed him the smokes. He pulled two out. One went between his lips and the other he passed to me. We lit our cigarettes. The car bustled on. I couldn't remember the questions but I knew I didn't have the answers.

"Where are we going?" I asked, somewhat hesitantly. "Whistler. That's where they want you." He puffed his cigarette like it was medicine. "Who?"

Puzzled, he looked back to me. “Geneva. You’ve made a lot of enemies, whoever you are.”

I finished my smoke and rolled up the manual window. “Geneva? Like, Switzerland?”

“Like Switzerland.”

“But I don’t even remember what I did.”

He shot me a face, looking unimpressed. Unbeknownst. “Well, you did something.”

Jonah took an exit and we were in the McDonald’s drive through. “Black coffee.” He paid at the window and we were back on the interstate.

It seemed the more I looked at Jonah the uglier he got. It wasn’t his teeth or his face or his greasy clothing or his disgusting car, it was all of it. Not that I could think of anyone else but he was definitely the nastiest person I had ever seen. Scabs covered his arms. His face riddled with scars. He looked like he used to fight but had lost and given up a long time ago. He took a sip of his coffee. We sat in silence for the rest of the car ride.

It was late when we arrived in Whistler. We were parked outside a newly developed motel on the top of a hill. Mountains surrounded us on all sides. It really was quite the view, if only I could disregard the confusion and physical aching.

“They’re not ready for you yet.” Jonah said, checking his phone. “Looks like we have some time to kill.”

Before I knew it we were back on the road, driving through the town. The streets were practically empty but a few stragglers walking from closing bar to closing bar as the day faded into obscurity. Everybody has to face the night sooner or later. It was a cold night to be out. Snow lined the edges of concrete, piling up and covering the sidewalks.

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

“I don’t have a whole lot to say.” I paused. “A lot of questions, maybe.”

“What do you want to know?” Jonah took a sharp right and we were on an empty street. Nobody in sight. He pulled another cigarette out of the box and lit it, turning to me to offer another. I declined. “How did I even get here?” I was aware of how crazy the words sounded as soon as they left my mouth. “I don’t even remember my name.”

“Let’s just say, you messed with the wrong dudes, dude.” It was weird hearing him say ‘dude’. Like he had never used the word before. “You got yourself in a bit more trouble than you can afford.”

“What kind of trouble? I can’t even remember yesterday.”

We were parked on a hill in a handicap spot. Puff. Puff. Puff. Jonah ashed his red. I didn’t know what to think or ask or feel so I just sat there and looked forward through the windshield.

“Let’s walk. I gotta make some returns.” The trunk popped and we got out of the car. Jonah grabbed a few bags and we began walking into the town.

The weather was okay. No rain. I still had my jacket on. I checked my pockets and found a pair of keys on a chain.

Jonah lead the way to the storefront area, glancing around at the different shops. He had bags in both hands and appeared nearly as overwhelmed as I did.

“What are you returning?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

None of the stores were open, yet we waited for what felt like hours outside an MEC until Jonah’s phone rang. He picked up instantly. “Hey, where are you? ... Yep, right outside...”

A man no taller than 5 feet approached us from the corner of one of the shops. He had dark skin, dark shades and a white shirt with no design. Black pants. Wide grin. Underweight.

“Look what the cat dragged in.” He spoke with a brim, dark voice. Although his face looked friendly he certainly did not sound it. No comic. He seemed already tired of the interaction.

Jonah went in for a brotherly hug but the man forced it into a handshake. “Drop the shit, Hudson.”

“Where’s the money?”

“You’ll get your money, now drop the shit.”

Jonah dropped the bags and stepped aside.

The man looked at me, then to Jonah. His mouth widened. “Who is the boy?”

“Confidential information, I’m afraid. If I told you they’d have to kill me.”

“Works for me.” The man pulled a semi automatic from under his belt and before Jonah had the chance to reply it was unloaded into his chest. Jonah bled out and was dead within seconds.

I never even told Jonah my name. Not that I even wanted to. I couldn’t even remember it.

“Let’s move. Do not be spotted.” The man nodded to me and turned his back. I followed. The bags disappeared behind us.

We moved in silence through the town. Too terrified to speak I kept my mouth shut, guided only by the hardly visible reflection of light upon the man’s jacket. The moon grazed our bodies as I tried to keep up with an ever-increasing speed. Before I knew it we were jogging through empty streets, no objective in sight.

As an old car to the side of the road came into view the man gravitated towards it, levitating outside the driver’s side. “Keys?” He asked, sounding almost sincere despite what had just happened. Confused, fearful and stupefied, I reached into my pocket, brought out the keys and threw them underhand. He caught them. “Get in.” Then we were in the car, bustling down the road once again. The radio clock read 12:38. I was sweating bullets under my jacket, hoping that he, like I, didn’t have any permeating questions. Seemed like my life pertained on keeping as silent as possible at that moment. As we drove we’d occasionally exchange glances but nothing

was said. The radio played quietly as the engine burred and heated the car, bustling back onto the highway. North again, further into the mountains.

The trees and natural habituais flew by us as we blasted up the interstate. I kept my head turned to the window and tried to piece together what had happened. Like some sort of puzzle with no resolving picture. No matter how I looked at the situation I was in trouble, but any resolutions were sitting in town miles behind us. My sliver of hope was dwindling.

Finally the man spoke. "There's a bounty on your head." He nodded, matter of fact like. "\$45,000. High enough to get the attention of a few of these spearheads." He was talking about Jonah. I watched him now as he eyed the road. "I'm interested in a lot more than simple luxury, though. Material wealth..." he trailed off, chuckling to himself. "...does me no good... What I'm looking for goes deeper than nickels and dimes." I looked to the road, then back to the man. "Then what do you want me for?" Leaning over, the man tapped his index finger to my temple a few times. "You've got a lot of information, boy." No further questions.

The clouds poured down and attacked our windows. The man turned on the wipers, full speed. The streets were lined with peeling reflective tape. As we drove it grew harder to see what was directly ahead. I passed out sometime around 1:30 AM and awoke in an even smaller town, alone in the car.

Almost instinctively I locked the doors and checked my peripheral. Nobody in sight. Check the glove compartment. Empty. Check the centre console. A wallet. Inside, a few tens and some cards. Identification. I stared back at myself as I held my driver's license in my hand. David Wallace.

Words couldn't describe the feeling. Both relieved and terrified, in possession of just enough information to strike hope while declaring fear and vulnerability. Clairvoyance revolved my body, filling me with ideas that disappeared within the moment. Why did these guys want me? Should I try to escape? Where would I go? Multitudes of Q&As lingered passively in the air. I pocketed my driver's license and unlocked the car door.

Outside again, somehow further into chaos. The mountains around me seemed to go on forever. Light snow trickled down. I stood alone in a parking lot. My head spun in every direction, analyzing the scene. A small square building sat adjacent to me. No windows. Chimney with smoke. Very inviting.

Deciding against investigating the building I continued searching the parking lot, looking for some sort of indication to an overall plan without knowing what that might be. I wanted somebody to tell me what was going on however given the circumstances paranoia struck me when envisioning interaction with strangers. What did they want with me? \$45,000? Was I really worth that much? My brain rattled as I pressed myself for answers, memories or some string of conscious thought that might piece together where I was and why I was there, but nothing presented itself. It was as if I were in a dream, given small descriptors of my surrounding as I moved throughout. My processing felt shaky and my body was sore. Lost in the mountains. Nothing to be found but potential enemies. I got back in the car, driver's side, and locked the doors. The building's chimney huffed & puffed, filling the sky with smoke. It reminded me of Jonah.

For whatever reason, intentional or not, the keys were left in the ignition, so I turned on the car. The engine came roaring to life. I flicked the heater and warmed up, watching the building through the windshield. Relaxed pop radio filled the interior, laughing at me in all my humility.

Despite my lack of awareness and complex situation, comfort overcame me. I knew I was going to be okay. As the heat buzzed on memories began rejuvenating me, explaining moments of my past. I remembered being in the back of a large van, again, questions up the yin yang. None of my replies seemed acceptable; the questions kept coming.

“Who are you?” One of the men, the passenger in the van asked, as if the inquiry weren’t on everyone’s mind. “What are they going to do to you?” He was looking at me with a grin, probably expecting some smart retort. “It won’t be our problem once that forty five is in our pockets, will it?” The driver responded with a chuckle. Aggression permeated my body with no outlet. I sat quietly in the backseat as the van scene devolved into recollection.

Looking back wasn’t going to solve anything now however the present provided no concrete response either, nothing telling me which way to go. Memories disappeared as quickly as they appeared, and I continued sitting motionless, bobbing my head to the FM as it sung me melodies. Suddenly the door to the building opened. A scantily dressed girl no older than 20 frantically exited the building. Petrification plastered her face. She spun around looking for something. Then her eyes met the car, then me. I watched her run closer as I tried to decide over the locks.

Her right hand gripped the handle, then her left. Both her hands were yanking the door. She was trying to pry it open. Her head swung up and her eyes met mine again. Fear screamed out. I unlocked the doors.

Jessica sat in the passenger seat of the old Chevy. I don’t know how I knew her name but I did. She was wearing a clad cardigan and khakis, both ripped in different areas. Toms, ripped, too, vaguely protected her feet. She was in shambles. I could relate. “Jessie.” She extended her hand. Clammy and covered in cuts. Mine met hers and she gripped it tightly, cautious yet reassuring.

“Dave,” I responded. “What’s in the building?” The first thing I could think to ask. She shook her head. “Drive.” I blinked a few times, still absorbing the state of affairs. “Don’t make me repeat myself, David.” she spoke, more aggressively this time. “DRIVE.”

The car was in D and we were back on the highway within minutes, heading North of wherever ‘here’ was. We had no GPS, no map and half a tank of gas.

We drove in silence for a few songs. I could hear her hum to the radio. Her head stayed turned to the passenger window as she watched the view and its generated prospections. The mountains kept growing.