SHORT STORY

The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Serial Murder

by Heidi Kofler



"Is Water Blue" by Jihye Sophie Yang

Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

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I had been driving for close to five hours by noon, and that was also almost how long it had been since I had last seen another person. The AC was blasting in my face at full strength.

I had been on the road long enough for it to become noon. The sun was scorching everything it touched, and I was beginning to feel its effects. No sane person should be out in the desert at this time of day.

I lowered the window briefly, hot air rushing in as I spat out my peppermint chewing gum. I was running low and would need to buy more at the next rest stop. The desert stretched out before me, wide and sizzling in the sun.

What did that say about me? My water supply had been running low for about a mile or two now. If I didn't reach a rest stop or have some poor, kind soul come to pick me up soon, I might just die out here.

At first, I thought I was starting to see things — staring at the same bland stretch of road would do that to you. But the figure at the side of the road would not disappear, not even when I slowed down. Ask me later and I could not have told you why I slowed down. Blame it on my boredom and yearning for actual conversation. Blame it on pathological self-loathing. Blame it on karma or destiny or some shit like that. I knew it was a dumb decision, and still I slowed down to a crawl next to the figure and rolled down my window:

At first, I thought I was starting to hear things — early heatstroke might do that to you. But the sound of the approaching car came closer. Nobody was more surprised than me when it actually slowed down next to me. Had nobody ever told this person that what they were about to do was dangerous? My lips twitched into a grin before I could stop myself. Blame it on my boredom. Blame it on my messed-up brain. I wondered if there might actually be someone looking out for me when the driver rolled down the window and asked:

"Need a ride?"

The words had left my lips before I even really saw him. He was carrying a tattered backpack on his shoulders. His clothes at first appeared to have seen better times, but on second glance I decided all they needed was a wash to get the dirt stains out — they even seemed top quality, something that surprised me. Under his impressive mix of sunburn and tan he was white. It was hard to say how old he was, but my guess was maybe a few years younger than me. He smiled at me in a friendly, carefree way that had become rarer and rarer to see on people in their late twenties these days. A naïve kid in the absolute middle of nowhere. Easy pickings, actually, good for getting back in the habit. Perfect.

I squinted into the car to see him better, even though there really was only one answer. He was not the naïve white family of four that I had expected, not even the well-meaning preacher, or

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the dorky college students on an adventure. He was wearing round wireframe glasses over a handsome rugged face. Maybe a bit older than me. I found him surprisingly hard to put in a box. He had medium length dark blond hair and a kind of haunted look in his eyes. His clothes were simple, jeans and loose t-shirt, put together in a way that looked lost. He seemed as surprised as I that he had stopped and offered me a ride. He might just have had a death wish. Perfect.

"Hell yeah! Thanks, man!"

This was still a terrible idea. He might behave like a drifter, but with clothes like these he was bound to be missed by someone. And I would have to keep him from suspecting anything until we got somewhere isolated. Well, sure, it doesn't get much more isolated than the desert. But somewhere more practical, away from the main road at least.

This was the best thing that could have happened to me. He had a car (even with AC!), he had bags in the back. I could sell his stuff and maybe even the car after I was done. Sure, somebody might miss him, what with him owning a car and everything, and the ring on his finger, but by the time they'd realized he was missing, I would be long gone.

"What brings you out here?"

I asked to ease the tension. Avoid him feeling uncomfortable and getting scared. People got nervous and uncomfortable if there was no noise for too long.

He asked to get rid of the awkward silence. Something funny I had noticed over time: people got nervous and uncomfortable if there was no noise for too long.

"The bus left me when I went to take a piss. Got tired of waiting for the next one."

He shrugged as if he was aware that that had been a spectacularly dumb decision, but simply did not care. My eyes fell to the driver's door compartment and the syringes that lay there.

I shrugged innocently. Out of his sight my hand wandered into the right pocket of my pants, where it closed around the cold steel of my knife. The edge of the blade cut into my skin. I did not care.

"I'm Jordan."

"Tobias."

"Where are you going, Tobias? Home to the wife and kids?"

I clenched my teeth and hoped he wouldn't notice. Of all the things he could have suggested, of course it had to be this one. *He couldn't have known*, the voice at the back of my head argued. But I had gotten too good again at silencing it lately.

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I watched him tense up. *Huh.* That was interesting. A small smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. Oh yes, this was gonna be good. Occasionally you got one that you could really play with before. And that made what followed even better.

"I've got some business in Sacramento in a couple days."

I tried to keep it vague and boring sounding enough that he would not ask more questions. It was still light outside, and if I had to drug him now, the dose would never hold until dark.

That sounded almost suspiciously boring and evasive. I brushed the hilt of my knife with my thumb. There was more than one way to dig deep and find out what made a man who he was.

"What kind of business?"

"…some odd job. I'll find out exactly what when I get to Sacramento."

It wasn't even that wrong. I had always found the truth made the best lies. The kid was curious, and maybe not quite as careless as I had thought — I was pretty sure he had picked up on my slip earlier.

The plot thickens. Former family man with a dark past and a mysterious future? Color me intrigued! Even if he would not actually get to experience that future, courtesy of my trusted blade.

"You telling me you're crossing two state lines for an odd job? Jesus, Tobias, I thought my life was crazy!"

I forced a smile. This used to be so much easier before Alice. I'd never let someone like him get to me before Alice.

His hands clenched tighter around the wheel. I was on the right track. Get him worked up. Make him careless.

"Tell me about it! I miss the easy days…"

On the horizon, I spotted a group of dry bushes, a good bit away from the road and big enough to hide the car in case anyone drove by.

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"Mind if we stop over there? I gotta piss."

"Sure, no problem. I gotta go too."

I could not stall much longer. I would do it there.

I didn't want to hold back much longer. I would do it there.

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I stopped the car behind the bushes, making it seem like I wanted to give us extra privacy while we did our business. I swiftly picked one of the syringes from the door and concealed it in my palm, while he was fiddling with the pocket on his cargo pants. We got out of the car together.

He stopped the car behind the bushes to give us extra privacy while we took a leak. I fiddled with the pocket cover of my pants, hyper aware of the knife inside. I was waiting for him to get out first, but he was taking his time. It wasn't ideal, but we got out of the car together.

I could feel the blood rushing through my veins, but after a single deep breath of hot, dry desert air my pulse slowed to a disturbingly calm and even beat. The syringe felt like an old friend I had randomly run into and we picked up exactly where we had left off. A part of me hated how much I had missed this, but I quickly silenced it. This was necessary.

My hand went inside my pocket and closed around the hilt as soon as I could stretch my legs. My tongue flicked over my lips in anticipation of the rush, the blood, the carnage. Murder was something primal, something ancient and pure. A force of nature all on its own, and I was its agent. The knife was an extension of myself. It was a thing of beauty.

We walked to the bushes together and lined up. He did not seem to mind me only standing a few feet away. I wouldn't have had it any other way.

We walked to the bushes together and lined up. I wondered if I should pretend to get my dick out, but I doubted I had to fool him any longer. This was it.

The moment had come. He threw me a glance and a curious little smile. My fingers gripped the syringe as intended and prepared to inject him in the neck as I gripped his shoulder.

He gripped my shoulder and I thought he might get handsy. Under different circumstances, I'd honestly have felt flattered; he was a good-looking guy. But the knife I raised to strike him took priority.

I automatically blocked his arm with mine and was astonished to see, gleaming in the sunlight, the polished large hunting knife, he had aimed at my torso.

To my utter surprise, his arm shot up to block mine. He was holding something small and shiny in his hand, that I realized was a syringe aimed for my neck.

I froze.

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So that's why you're not supposed to hitchhike — you might get picked up by a serial killer.

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What even were the odds? He lashed out with his knife, but I dodged the blow. I figured only one of us was walking away from this. He was unrefined, feral, but he had the better weapon. I dropped the syringe in the dirt and let my training kick in.

I imagined the surprise on his face mirrored my own. What were the chances? I laughed, wild and unhinged. His eyes were calculating behind his glasses, and I realized there was a lot more to him than expected. Ex-Spec Ops, if I had to guess. Interesting.

He lashed at me again, falling into a sort of macabre dance. His laugh echoed across the desert. I started to copy his footwork, mirroring his steps. I saw his eyes twitch and gleam. When he tried to cut me again, I was ready for him.

We danced for a couple of beats. I was looking forward to seeing his blood spill. It had been so long since I had had one that was a challenge. I struck my knife at him again, but this time he grabbed my wrist and twisted it violently.

He screamed in pain and almost drowned out the sound of breaking bones. It was a precision break, effective and clean. He dropped the knife. I caught it before it hit the ground and prepared to use it against him. He caught me by surprise.

The pain flared up white-hot, but I screamed and powered through it. Not the first time someone had broken my wrist. He might have had my knife now, but was distracted enough for me to punch him square in the face with my good hand.

I felt my cheekbone throb and my glasses slip off my face. Not usually a problem for hand-to-hand combat, but I took it as a personal insult that this kid had gotten in a hit. I blinked, willing my eyes to focus, but before I could strike him with the knife, I felt a sharp kick into my stomach that knocked the air right out of me.

Oh, he was a tough one! He only stumbled a little after the punch and was not even bothered by his glasses landing in the sand. Getting in close enough to knee him in the stomach while he was holding my knife was a risk, but, as the saying goes - no risk, no fun! As he doubled over, I got in another punch to his face.

I tasted blood and bile after the second punch. My mind was working hard to find a way out of this, but I already knew I had miscalculated. He was tougher than I had expected. Or maybe I was rustier than I had thought. I stumbled and hit the deck hard, down in the hot soil.

As soon as he was on the ground, I kicked the knife from his hand. I did not pick it up. I wanted to do it with my bare hands alone. I punched him in the head once more and he fell sideways into the dirt. My boot met his ribs and I heard a satisfying crunch.

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I felt my rib crack and let out a muffled scream. I grasped at the dirt in a pitiful attempt to get away, but he straddled me and held me down with his elbow while he punched whatever he could reach with his unbroken hand.

He wheezed in pain when I sat down on him and leaned on his injured rib cage. This was fun! I watched him still trying to crawl away while I was punching him. I felt his thigh muscles working under my ass. A worthy opponent.

My vision was blurring more than it should. Sharp, hot rocks were burning the side of my face. I could hardly breathe against the pain from my ribs. Suddenly I felt something between my fingers that was not dirt, something sleek and cool. My heart skipped a beat. It was my only chance to get out of this alive. I aimed blindly and gathered all my strength.

My fingers wrapped around his neck. I could feel his Adam's apple bob under my thumb as he tried to get out of my grip. I would have preferred to do this with both hands, but as long as I still had my fun… Suddenly his arm shot up and punched into my shoulder in what I thought was a last desperate effort, but then I felt the sting of the needle in my arm.

He froze and I tried to focus on his face, but the sun above us made it hard to see, even up close. My eyes followed my own arm and saw that I had plunged the needle into his shoulder. I shakily let go of the breath I had been holding and waited for him to fall unconscious. And then he laughed.

I stared at the syringe sticking out of my shoulder. I moved my arm — the one with the throbbing, broken wrist — and watched it bob up and down. The situation was not lacking a certain element of humor. I could feel the tip of the needle scratch against my skin and whatever liquid had been inside run down my arm. I laughed.

"Looks like you owe me a pack of smokes!"

I felt my heart sink and stared in disbelief at the square pack of cigarettes tucked tightly under his shirt sleeve. I had hit it right in the middle. The sedative was running harmlessly down his arm. My eyes closed in resignation. I was sure he was going to kill me now.

Still chuckling I looked down at him. He had fight in him, and a carefully controlled ferocity. A sharp calculating mind that saw moves ahead, so unlike my own instinct driven spontaneity. I smiled. Oh, yes, we could still have a lot of fun.

To my utter surprise, he got off my chest and sat down in the dirt next to me, propping himself up against the car. I frowned and watched him light a cigarette with a silver zippo lighter. He blew smoke from his nostrils and poked at his injured wrist curiously.

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I had to fight hard not to choke on the smoke because the look of absolute confusion on his face was funnier than anything I had seen all day. I looked around and found his glasses within my reach. They were still whole. I picked them up and handed them to him.

"You do this a lot, Tobias? Pick up people and try to kill them?"

I put on my glasses and blinked. He was completely calm and relaxed. I was not sure what to make of him, and doubted I'd ever figure it out.

Of course, he was still suspicious of me, but after a moment of hesitation he joined me in the relative shade of the car. He left a few feet of space between us.

"Used to do it more often. Pays good money, if you do it right."

"What happened? You got caught?"

"No. Got married."

"And you missed it? That why you're doing it again?"

"No, I didn't miss it. She died."

"I'm sorry, man. Did you kill her?"

"No. I didn't."

We sat next to each other, just breathing for a while. I looked him over again. Yeah, no chance those clothes were his. And those stains were probably not pasta sauce either.

I stared at him in the silence that followed and noticed stuff I had overlooked before. Like the brick wall build he hid under that loose shirt, and the calluses on his knuckles.

"What about you, Jordan? You do this a lot?"

He shrugged it off as if he were talking about fly-fishing.

As if murdering people was the weirdest hobby one could have.

"Sure. What else is there to do for real fun nowadays?

Then again, I could not really judge him for his life choices.

He pursed his lips, considering for a moment. I chuckled.

"So, Tobias, how do we move forward from this?"

"Huh. I honestly don't know. This has never happened to me before."

"Oh, well, you know, after a certain age this is completely normal…"

"Seriously?!"

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He was joking. I had broken his wrist and he my ribs and now he was making raunchy jokes. He was chaos.

He raised his brows, but the twitching of his lips was undeniable and unmistakable. He found it funny too.

"…so are we still gonna kill each other?"

"Right now? Nah. Don't feel it anymore. You put up so much of an effort, gotta admire that. Down the line, who knows? …probably not. Would feel weird, if you know what I mean." Yeah. Yeah, I think I do." "…that job in Sacramento… is that, whatchacallit, wet work too?"

I hesitated. Should I tell him? Would it hurt if I did? He already knew I was a killer — he was probably the only one I could tell.

He hesitated and I knew he would not tell me everything. Fine, I'd let him have that secret for now. I'd find it out eventually.

"Yeah… wouldn't pay well for you though."

"Relax, I'm not looking to steal your job — that's what robots are for, aren't they? Well, maybe not in our line of 'work'… What's in it for you, if not money?"

I paused because I realized how much I would like to tell someone. It had been ages since I could be completely honest with anyone about what I did.

I was talking to a guy about killing people, and he was not judging me, or trying to arrest me. Huh. This was a first. And, honestly? I liked it.

"Information."

"What kind?"

"None that'd matter to you."

"Aw, c'mon, Tobias, first you make me curious and now you're just gonna leave me hanging? Not cool. Not cool at all!" "Let's just say someone did me wrong and I'm looking to find them, alright?"

Saying even that much out loud still felt like a stab to my gut, but at the same time it felt cathartic.

That tidbit already made so much about him make a lot more sense. I nodded slowly.

"Want help with that?"

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I huffed and blinked several times. I almost couldn't believe what he was suggesting. He had tried to kill me not fifteen minutes ago. Expect the unexpected.

It's not like I had any other plans, and with any luck there would be a murder in it for me. Smirking, I watched his face turn from 'No!' to a careful '…maybe.'

"Come on, you're obviously not at the top of your game! Besides, what else have you got to lose?"

Nothing except my life, and in my darkest moments even that seemed expendable. And he was right. I had been out of the game for too long. In my prime, Jack the Ripper himself could not have surprised me like Jordan had. He was chaos. Everything he had done so far had been unexpected. I'd have to be very careful in how I was going to use him for what was to come.

I finished my cigarette and put it out on the ground, while I watched him debate what to do. I waited with metaphorically bated breath, because I already knew what his answer would be. People like him were predictable. Usually level-headed and calculated, but hurt them and they lash out like a wounded animal, without any regard for their own safety. It was going to be a blast.

"We'll see. Once we get to Sacramento."

A daring move, to trust him that much, I thought to myself as we prepared to continue our journey. Blood was going to be spilled at the end of it — I had to be very careful whose it was going to be.

Working together with someone, on a kill, no less! I marveled as we got back into his car. Blood was going to be spilled at the end of this journey — I was very curious to see whose it was going to be.

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