

Dustbowl Xia

Episode 2 - Black Sunday

Written by Daniel Bayn

A bottle of wine explodes against the wall. Its remains drip down behind the counter and onto the bald pate of an old man. He presses a cross to his lips with quaking hands and prays.

Another bottle follows the first. "Crap! Crap! All crap!" The bellows belong to a man who looks like he recently passed out at a funeral. His rumpled, black suit and tie are stained with a mix of dirt and drink. His fedora is crushed onto his head, overseeing at least a day's growth of beard. "If I wanted ta drink piss, I coulda stayed inna alley!"

A pair of policemen enter, one with his hands up and one with his hands down... carrying cuffs. "Hey, rummy!" the former interjects. "Just calm down, a minute. We wanna talk to ya."

Rummy looks skeptical. "Look a' this crap," he replies while brandishing a bottle of scotch. "It's crap! In'it there a law 'bout sellin' crap?! In *stores*?!"

Officer Friendly nods. "Health code violation, for sure." He makes his way down Rummy's aisle, his partner still hiding behind him. "We'll get the inspector in here first thing in the morning. Right now, I just need you to put the bottle down."

"Jussa minute." Rummy uncorks said bottle with one thumb and starts pouring the contents down his gullet. Officer Friendly moves in and pulls the drunk's arms behind his back, almost spilling the bottle, but rummy can't allow that. He drops the bottle, kicks it back up with his knee, then balances it upright on top of his head. "You guys got busy hands," he says with a frown.

Rummy juggles his scotch while he takes care of the cops. First, he kicks Officer Friendly in the shin, knocking the policeman down and freeing his arms. Then, he twists into a spin kick that passes right over Friendly and forces his partner to dodge back before he can close those cuffs. The bottle starts to slide off his head, so he leans back like a limbo champ, catches it, and takes a swig.

The policemen pull out their nightsticks and Friendly motions for his partner to go around behind. Thusly flanked, Rummy puts down the scotch and picks up two big bottles of whiskey. He blocks Friendly's first swing and counters with a jab to the gut. The mass of booze and glass knocks the wind right out of him. Junior comes to the rescue. Seemingly off balance, Rummy pitches and weaves around every attack. One of Junior's wild swings wipes all the bottles off a shelf. Rummy stares morosely at the carnage.

Junior clocks him in the back of the head and smashes Rummy's face into the liquor-soaked wood. He laps up a little with his tongue, then slides backward as Junior's night stick slams down. Rummy traps the weapon under one bottle while the other cracks the cop across the nose.

Now, Friendly's back in the fight. He falls on Rummy like a bag of bricks, pressing him into the wood. Lap, lap, lap. Rummy hooks one foot around Friendly's knee and pulls it in, eliminating his leverage. Then, he pushes the cop back, runs up the shelf, and flips over his head, landing in the next aisle over.

"Fuck this," Friendly mutters as he draws his gun. Rummy runs for cover, but Friendly paces him down the aisle. A wave of liquor and broken glass rises in their wake. At the end of the road, Rummy runs up the wall and around the corner. As Friendly tries to track his target, Rummy reaches down and grabs the gun, yanking it away as he slips once more over the officer's head.

"Guns are bad," the drunk scolds as he turns the weapon over in his hands. Almost by accident, he takes the revolver apart. "I thought you were the good cop."

Rummy lurches forward and delivers a long-range rabbit punch to Friendly's face, then grabs the cop by his ear and drags him to the front of the store. He switches his grip to Friendly's uniform, spins him around, and sends him sailing through the storefront window.

Then, he gets a beer.

Sirens and lights appear from everywhere at once. Squad cars cruise into the parking lot, hop over the curb, round the corner in a bootleg turn. They form a solid wall outside the store. Rummy's ears fill with the sound of a dozen hammers being cocked at once.

The bottle slips from his hand and falls to pieces.

Headlights flare through the squad car windows. A hearse smashes into them like a freight train. It barrels toward Rummy, shrugging off bullets and bits of wreckage, then slides to a sideways stop. Its hubcaps kiss the curb.

The passenger door pops open. A priest leans over from the driver's side. "This is your moment of clarity, Jack. Get in."

Dodge City - 1935

Dante shambles down a hotel hallway and stops before a door. He makes a token effort to straighten his fancible clothes, but he's obviously been gutter-stomped. When he finally makes his entrance, head held reasonably high, Ahote is waiting.

"I don't suppose that's what you look like after a successful date?" he asks.

"No," Dante replies with dignity. "It is not." He collapses onto the couch.

"What happened?"

Dante falls through a table, which launches food and booze into a crowd of well-dressed swing kids. He tramples a poker game. He's being hefted into the air by a giant in an apron, slammed onto a bar, and slid all the way down its length.

"So, you were making friends."

Dante glares. "It's been said. Anyway, Lotus held off the mob so I could escape."

Lotus spins like a top, her heel knocking back a wave of angry townsfolk. Dante wall-runs over the mob and bolts out the door.

"I'm sure she'll be here any minute. Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Well, she was dancing with this hobo, so..."

Lotus spins Dante around to face a man in a ruffled suit, who grabs Dante by the collar and rolls backward, dragging him into a sacrifice throw, and sends him crashing through that table.

Ahote shakes his head slowly. "What did you do?"

"Me?! I was captivating! Downright *charming*! If she wants to make time with a hobo, that's her pejorative."

"Prerogative," the shaman corrects. "I haven't known Lotus very long, but I doubt that's all there is to it. Oh god, you didn't disparage Buster Keaton, did you?!"

"What? No. Good tip, though."

"Why don't you tell me everything that happened, start to finish?"

"Well, we went out to spend the rest of Ray's money, as you so kindly suggested..."

The nightclub's hoppin'. College kids dressed in their Saturday best swing away to a jazz band's tunes. Factory workers shoot the shit while businessmen play poker in a booth ten feet away. Others mingle at the bar opposite the stage, worshipping at an altar to alcohol. The sprawling liquor rack is two stories tall and backlit for dramatic effect.

At a table near the dance floor, Lotus scrapes her plate clean while Dante pushes his dinner around with a fork. "Midwestern food is so lifeless. I'd kill for some jambalaya or a little crawfish etoufee."

"Cantonese is spicy, too," Lotus mumbles around her mouthful, "but this beats the hell outta beef jerky and truck stop diners. Enjoy what you have while you have it."

"Point taken." He throws back the last of his wine and jumps out of his chair. "Since you're done eating, it's time to dance!"

"Aren't I supposed to wait thirty minutes?" He's already pulling her onto her feet. "Okay, okay!" She kisses her wine goodnight and lets him lead her onto the dance floor. Slack-jawed stares accompany them, as if the locals have never seen an inter-racial couple dressed in men's clothing before.

Dante takes her chin and turns it toward him. "Eyes up here, honeycakes. Never mind the yokels."

The velvet tones of a trumpet envelope them. Dancing with Dante is effortless; he dips and twirls her, guides her hands and feet, lets the music carry them both. A few of the college kids take notice. They throw out their best moves in unspoken challenge and Dante responds. Then, they're in a duel and the whole club is watching. Dante throws her in the air, slides her through his legs, twirls her... and frowns in frustration.

"One second," he hurries over to a table where three young black women are sipping cocktails. "Ladies..." He whips the cloth off their table without so much as shifting the centerpiece. They clap as he pirouettes away and wraps the tablecloth around his waist before rejoining his partner.

Now, he leads without leading, guides Lotus through the male steps while he flares his skirt with the best of the ladies. She lifts him over her head, he slides between her legs. She twirls him out, then reels him back in as the song fades away. Lotus almost kisses him, but the swingers crowd around and ruin the moment.

When the three black women come to get their hands on their tablecloth (they don't take it back, just get their hands on it), they pointedly push Lotus aside. Dante doesn't seem to notice, so absorbed is he in his accolades. The band takes five.

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"It wasn't my fault, Aho. Seriously. This crowd formed around us and they were all 'That was amazing!' and 'How did you do that thing?' and 'Let me touch your muscly arm.' What was I supposed to do? Tell 'em all to screw?"

"You were supposed to keep you mind on your beeswax! This is your problem, Dante." Aho stands up and does a terrible impression of Dante's fighting style. "Your chi is all over the place. Always. It makes you responsive as all hell, but you gotta learn to focus sometimes." He snaps into an even worse impression of a kung-fu stance. "Like Lotus does."

"I didn't know you went in for all that eastern mysticism stuff."

"I paint from a broad palette. The point is, you were so wrapped up in responding to your new fans, I bet you didn't even notice when she left the dance floor. She probably went over to the bar, to drown her disappointment, and saw that hobo character dancing for nickels..."

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Lotus slinks over to the bar, orders a shot. She can hear Dante cracking jokes with his chippies. She orders another. Then, she glances down the bar and sees someone cutting a rug without the music. Rail workers are shouting requests: "Juggle two more!" "Catch this on your head!" "Do another flip!" Each completed task puts another penny in the performer's hat.

She looks closer. He's over the hill, a little filthy, and dressed in a rumpled, black suit. His shirt's untucked and his chin casts a two-day shadow. He weaves around like a drunk, but his balance is impeccable. He does a little soft shoe with a stack of three empty glasses on his head, leans back and lets them fall. He catches one in each hand and the third with his foot. Lotus claps along with the other onlookers.

"Hey," she flags down the bartender. "Who's the juggler?"

"No idea," the big man shrugs. "We've been calling him the Drunken Monkey. Been comin' around for a coupla days. Helped me throw out a bunch of gorillas, the first night. Guy's got crazy moves."

"You don't say. What's he drink?"

"Everything," her informant chuckles. "When he's had a good night, he usually orders a Manhattan off the top shelf."

"I'll take two." While the bartender fixes her cocktails, she watches the Drunken Monkey run up a wall, cartwheel with no hands, and spin on his head. She cuts through the crowd while he's still up-side down.

"Sorry, boys. I'm putting him on retainer." They're too busy picking up their jaws to object. An assertive, Chinese woman dressed in a suit is a little outside of their range of experience. The monkey, on the other hand, takes one look at that Manhattan and comes to terms.

"I'm Jack. Let me help you with those." He collects his retainer and shakes her newly liberated hand. "What's the job, boss?"

"I need a new dance partner and you've got some twinkly toes, so..."

He looks sidelong at Dante while downing most of his drink. The band's just about ready for another set. "I suppose I should ask you to dance."

"Seems like the natural course of events."

"No use fightin' it." His glass goes back up, then slams down on the bar. "Care to dance, boss?"

"Delighted." Lotus leaves her glass next to his.

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"Maybe she wanted to hurt your feelings in return, or maybe she just wanted to remind you not to take her for granted. In any case, she got your attention. What happened next?"

"I tried to talk to her..."

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Lotus stands awkwardly by while Jack tears up the dance floor. Dante ignores him and walks right up to her. "There you are, dollface. I've been looking everywhere. Never thought you'd be hiding on the dance floor."

Jack pops up like a him in a box. "Hey, fella. It's customary to ask before cuttin' in."

Dante's eyes bounce between the two of them, then lock onto the interloper. "Yeah, it is. Where were your manners? The lady's with me."

"That so, boss?" Jack gives Lotus a chance to back out.

"Nope," she says sweetly.

"From her lips to your heart, pal." Jack turns his back on Dante and guides Lotus towards the swing kids. Dante grabs Jack's shoulder, about to protest, but the Drunken Monkey throws a right hook his way. Dante lets go and leans back as the fist sails by. Jack looks surprised. He throws a few more, but Dante's a ghost.

Jack steps off for a moment. "Huh."

"I know!" Lotus slaps Jack on the shoulder. "Ain't it like a bad itch?!"

Dante puts both hands in front of him. "Come on, now, rummy. Cool it. I just need to talk to the lady for a minute."

Jack lurches forward, as if falling into Dante, but balances on one foot and reaches out with a flurry of punches. It almost catches Dante off guard, but he slides under the flying fists and hooks his foot around Jack's heel. He pulls the proverbial rug out from under his adversary, who tumbles into a backwards somersault.

Jack rolls back his feet and springs into the air. He barrel rolls several times, then drives his foot into the dance floor. Dante barely clears the space in time. He sweeps one foot in front of him, high and slow. Jack ducks under, but Dante sashays into a spin kick. Jack nearly takes it in the temple.

Instead, he falls to the floor at the last moment and lies there on his side. When Dante looks down, confused, Jack's foot snaps towards his face. The dancer turns his head, leans away, and blocks with one hand. They trade spins kicks and leg sweeps until Dante cartwheels over Jack's head, shoving his face to the floor, and lands eye-to-eye with Lotus.

"Had your fun?" He asks, plainly not interested in the answer.

"You're doin' great!" Lotus takes him by the shoulders, turns him around, and shoves him towards Jack. The Drunken Monkey grabs his lapels and hops up onto Dante's chest. His weight pulls them both off balance. As Dante falls forward, he feels Jack's foot in his stomach. He kicks them apart when Dante's at his apogee and sends him flying into a table, upside-down and backwards.

Drinks get airborne, dresses get stained, factory men and swing kids get pissed. Lotus goes for her guns, but they're not exactly dinner attire. They're lying on the couch, back at the hotel.

The mob chases Dante into a corner booth. He escapes by climbing over, but ends up trampling the poker game next door. Enraged businessmen clutch at Dante's wing-tips. He plummets over the end of the booth and tumbles into the rail workers by the bar.

Apparently, that's the house limit. The bartender pumps a shotgun and the band falls quiet. "Do I have to call the sheriff?!" he demands. Dante vaults over the bar and hides behind the giant's apron. "Let's all go back to our seats, get that table righted, and act like civilized goddamned people!" Dante hops up onto the counter, crosses his arms sternly, and shakes his head in disapproval. "I'm sure this gentleman will buy you all a round!"

The giant turns, expecting confirmation, but all Dante can do is pull out his pockets. Lotus has the payroll. She steps forward, but Jack restrains her.

"On the other hand..." The bartender puts down the shotgun and picks up the Dante, then slides him down the length of the bar. The mob follows and, when Dante hits the floor, he's all theirs.

Lotus shoves Jack aside and flies over their heads. She lands above Dante, punches his largest attacker in the face, then leaps into a tornado kick that knocks the whole mob back. She lifts Dante by his collar and lets him plant his feet. His lips start to move, but she cuts him off. "Just get the hell outta here. You've made enough friends."

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"So I figure she'll be right behind me." Dante looks at the door. It misses its cue.

"Or maybe she's shackled up with the hobo right now," Ahote muses. "I'll bet they're curled up under a bridge somewhere, feeding each other cold beans out of a can, making lice-ridden love beneath the stars..."

Dante hurls a pillow into the shaman's laughing face. "I'm sure she cut that old rummy loose as soon as she was done with him."

Jack and Lotus lie beneath the stars. "Can you feel it?" someone asks. "It's the pulse of the world, mana flowing down the Sante Fe Trail. Flowing from the past to the future, carrying us with it."

A priest sits cross-legged above their heads, parked in the back of a hearse. The hearse itself is parked in a set of wheel ruts that are etched deep in the hard-packed earth. One runs beneath Jack and Lotus, respectively, right down their spines.

"We are all stardust," the priest continues. "You, me, everything in and on the Earth. The only place heavy elements are born is inside the unimaginable furnace of a star. The buddhists believe individuality is an illusion, that all things are one in god. How right they are."

Lotus shifts uncomfortably and casts a glance at Jack, who looks serene. "Um, yeah... I'm not feelin' it, father."

"No apology necessary," the padre replies. "Your chi is so strong, I can't image how you'd feel anything else. Please, call me Faro. I'm not exactly in good standing with the Church."

"So, all this ley lines stuff... is that why Ahote can drive up the side of a building?"

"Your friend aligns his energies with those of the world. That makes him powerful."

"Can you drive up the side of a building?"

The priest opens one eye. "I can't say it's ever come up. Can your friend see the future?"

"He thinks he can, but he's usually wrong. Why? Can you?"

"I know how and why I will die. I can see how and why others have died. Sometimes, when fate is pulling hard in one direction, I can see how events will unfold. It's prediction, but I'm rarely wrong."

"How's tomorrow looking?" Jack asks.

"Cloudy," Faro answers. "Something's on the horizon."

Lotus sits up and brushes herself off. "Speaking of which, how about we get down to brass tacks on this bank heist?"

"There will be time enough tomorrow." Faro's serenity invites no argument. "For now, can we just soak up the chi and center ourselves?"

Lotus lies back down beside her hat, but only passes a moment in silent contemplation before turning to Jack. "So, this guy who owns the bank, the Tailor... how'd he end up on your bad side?"

Jack rolls over and gives her a long look. "He's an extortionist and a murderer... and a witch." Lotus' laugh dies on the vine. "Seriously. He uses black magic to steal people's lives. I've seen it. It was the same night I saw someone who flies like you do. I came home late... drunk as ever. I slipped in through a window, trying not to wake my wife. When I got to our bedroom, I found them standing over her..."

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A gentle wind blows through an open window. The drapes brush up against a sleeping woman with needles in her throat. Bent over her is a man in a pin-stripped suit. He plucks one of the needles out and sticks it in his lapel alongside dozens of others. A second man stands nearby, dressed in a yellow duster and a ten gallon hat.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?!" The words burst out of Jack like a popped cork and ricochet around the room. The cowboy whirls around, a gun in each hand. His cohort just turns his head a little, glances towards the door, and sighs.

"I thought you'd stay out later, Jack. Didn't take you for a lightweight."

"Get those things outta my wife and get the hell outta my house!"

Another sigh. "You can plainly see that I'm already removing my instruments. As for leaving, well... I don't slum around like this any longer than I must." He removes the last of the needles and reunites them with their brothers. "I'm afraid your wife is very sick, Mister Daniels. Her treatment will be quite expensive."

Jack starts forward, but the cowboy has him cold. The click of a hammer stops him dead.

"Don't kill him," the Tailor instructs. "He still needs to pay us." Then, he climbs out the window and into the night.

"I reckon you don't need your knees to sign a check." Bullets whiz past Jack's legs and perforate the floor. He tap dances out of the way. The gunman grins and aims higher, testing his opponent. Jack rolls backward into his study; bullets pass before his eyes. Then, he's on his feet and running up the side wall as the cowboy empties his guns into the floorboards.

Jack flips across the room and pulls a shotgun off the wall. He aims it at the door and pulls the trigger just a moment too soon. The bastard ducks back into the hallway, impossibly fast. The door explodes where his head had been.

"Oh ho ho!" the cowboy guffaws. "You're a fun one! Come out here and we'll play for real." He puts away his pistols and draws a modified Winchester rifle from its sheath. He holds it in one hand, like a sword; there's even a counter-weight where the rifle butt should be. With his other hand, he draws an enormous bowie knife. Thus armed, he advances into the room. "En garde!"

Jack pumps his shotgun and pulls the trigger, but the cowboy lunges forward and turns the shotgun aside with the tip of his rifle, sending shot into the ceiling. He immediately steps in and jabs with his knife. Jack lurches out of the way and falls to the floor mid-reload. He suspends himself on one hand and aims with the other.

The cowboy parries the shot with his knife and brings his rifle to bear. Jack kicks it to the side and windmills his feet around, pushing the gunman back as he twists himself upright. He holds the shotgun like a staff, blocks a knife slash meant for his jaw, then cracks the cowboy in the temple. Blood drips down to his cheshire grin.

The rifle stabs forward, almost piercing Jack's gut, but the rummy turns to the side and lets it slide past. A bullet blasts through the trash can behind him. Jack tries for another butt to the face, but the gunman parries and then scrapes his knife down the length of the shotgun. Jack lets go before he loses his fingers. He ducks under the knife, grabs the cowboy's knee with both hands, and yanks him off his feet. The shotgun drops into his hands and Jack levels it as his prone opponent.

A boot to the sternum sends Jack flying through the window. His shot goes wide and he plunges two stories into his front yard, narrowly missing the curb.

A monstrous vehicle stampedes down the block, its grill a gaping maw. The cowboy flies from Jack's window, soars over the yard, and perches on the car's hood as it passes.

Jack rolls onto his side and watches them escape. He feels something sting his chest, then a gunshot shatters the air. He looks down and sees blood bubbling from a hole in his shirt...

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"It's lodged right between my heart and my lung. Doctors said it'd be too dangerous to remove, so there it stays."

"Wow." Lotus is rapt. "You got lucky."

"I think he did it on purpose." Jack rubs his chest absent-mindedly. "We've almost caught up to them, a coupla times, and this bullet always burns when we get close. We're connected now. We always will be... until one of us is dead. I think that's why he did it."

"Incredible."

"Yeah, I guess. My wife and I refused to pay any blood money. I spent my family's fortune trying to find a cure, but she wasn't sick. She was hexed. That man, the Tailor, he's a witch and his black magic put her in the ground."

"She brought me to Jack shortly thereafter and we've been tailing the Tailor ever since." Faro gets up, walks between them, extends Lotus a hand. "Whereas it seems I'll be getting neither rest nor relaxation tonight, I suppose we might as well meet your friends."

Dante sits on a desk chair in the middle of a disaster area, formerly a hotel room. His hands and feet are bound to said chair with strips of cloth... shredded bed sheets, judging by the floral print. Lotus leans over to look him in the eye. "I'm sorry about this, really. You didn't give us much of a choice."

"C'est la vie, ma cherie. You did what you do. Can't expect anything else." He pulls against his restraints, leans in closer. "Just tell me this: What do you see in that guy? He's a boozier, a criminal, and he's *ancient*."

"Ancient?! How old are you?!" she balks.

"Twenty-six. How old are you?"

"... Twenty-nine."

"What? Were you doing the math? Why the long pause?"

"'Cuz I'm thirty-three, that's why?!"

"Really? You look good!"

"For an old hag?"

"For anybody! Christ on a cracker, accept the damn compliment!"

"That was a compliment? You were much smoother with the chippies at the club."

"Yeah, about that... I've got this thing with my chi and... old habits... Look, I'm sorry I made you feel unwanted. You're so far from unwanted, it's like... from here to China, or Australia, or whatever's on the other side of the Earth. Anyway, it's really far. You're definitely wanted."

She gives him a peck on his bruised cheek. He tries not to flinch. "That's sweet, but it's not the only thing this is about, not anymore."

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Dante stands in the middle of a hotel room that's not in the least bit destroyed. "Hell no!" he yells at the kitchenette. Lotus stands there, behind the counter, with her two new friends.

"Dante, watch your language!" she reprimands him. "There's a priest present... sorta."

"Pardon me, father, but there ain't no way I'm helpin' *him* rob *anything*. No sir, not this black man!"

"Will you help his wife?" Faro asks. "We're trying to bring her killers to justice. Robbing this bank is the only way to draw them out."

Ahote puts a hand on Dante's shoulder. "Revenge is never righteous, but there's a more immediate reason we can't help you. What if your robbery causes a run on the banks? These people are just starting to get back on their feet after the Crash."

"Yeah," Dante backs up his shaman. "What if that?!"

Faro risks a sly smile. "Haven't you heard? The government's selling insurance, now. The bank's customers are covered. The only one who's gonna lose their shirt is the banker, and he's got it coming."

"You wouldn't put so much faith in the government if you'd been to California recently," Ahote rebuts. "Thousands of people are still clinging to life in those Hooverville slums. Besides, I'm pretty sure you and your friend are more than capable of knocking over a bank by yourselves. There's only one reason Destiny could have brought us here: To stop you."

"Yeah!" Dante leans into it, shakes his fists of fury.

Lotus slams her palms against the countertop. "What the hell, Ahote?! I finally join you on the crazy train and now you wanna pull the brake?! Do you *enjoy* jerking me around?!"

Dante takes a bullet for his shaman. "He's just trying to show you what's been in front of your nose all night, Lotus! These guys are crooks!"

"Heeeeeeeey everybody!" Jack slurs from the honor bar. "Stay cool, cats and kittens. No need to shout it out. Me and the padre will just skidaddle and you can get back to whatever voodoo you do." He grabs Faro by the arm and sashays toward the door, but Ahote intervenes.

"You gentlemen should stay a while. In a few hours, I bet we can sneak you into the continental breakfast." Jack grabs him by his red suspenders and starts to lean back, but Faro puts a cautionary hand on his shoulder.

"Ahote's just walking his path, Jack." The monkey lets go and backs up, almost into the middle of Lotus and Dante's continued bickering. He quickly rejoins the conversation by the door. "I'm sure there's no need for violence. We're all fellow travelers, here."

"Quite," Ahote retorts whilst straightening his suspenders. "That's why you two get to enjoy the continental breakfast while I take a trip to the police station."

"Whatever you did, I'm sure it's not worth turning yourself in," snarks the Ferryman.

"To the contrary, I'm just going to let them know when to expect you at the bank."

"You'd rat out a fellow traveller?"

"It beats a beating."

"We won't let you do it," Jack interjects. "This is too important."

"Go!" Dante yells as he leaps onto the two men's backs and grabs a collar in each hand. "I'll hold 'em off!" Dante's weight pulls Faro and Jack off their feet. The three of them stumble away from the door and crash through the coffee table in the center of the room.

Jack and Dante spring to their feet as Lotus flies between them. She launches a kick at Dante, but he dances around and pops Jack in the kisser. The old man reels and retaliates with a backfist. Dante leans back just far enough to let it hit Lotus instead.

"What the...?!" Lotus wipes some blood from her split lip and fixes Jack with a death's head stare. He puts up his hands, but they just wave to her fist as it collides with his face. Dante laughs. Jack kicks him in the gut. Lotus hits them both.

Faro slips away while the three stooges are occupied.

Dante gets behind Jack and locks up his arms. Jack tries to shake him loose, but he just ends up taking one of Lotus' kicks in the gut. Dante dances him around like a puppet and throws a few vicarious punches at Lotus. Now, it's her turn to laugh.

"Christ, lady! Who's side are you on?!" The lady's smile dissolves. She sweeps Jack's legs, turning him sideways, then delivers an opeh-hand strike to his chest. The force of the blow sends both men toppling over the couch.

Lotus' guns tumble with them. Jack pops back up with one in hand; he waves it in Dante's general direction. "You have got to be the single most irritating person I've met this week." He looks at his watch. "And it's Sunday, so that's sayin' somethin'."

Dante takes a bow.

"God, I really should just shoot you. Wadaya say, boss?"

Lotus avoids Dante's eyes. "Go ahead and shoot. He'd probably just dance around it, anyway." That could be admiration or exasperation in her voice. "I'm still in for the heist, but you best put my gun down. That's like touching a samurai's sword." Jack gives her a blank expression. She sighs. "That's bad."

"Sorry, boss." He thumbs the safety and hands her sword over. "What should we do with..." Dante full body tackles his ass!

Ahote sails down a dark road. He leans slightly forward and peers out the window at an unfamiliar skyline. He snaps back to attention when the ass end of a hearse pulls past his window. Faro rolls his window down as he paces Sweetness in reverse.

"You sure you know where you're going?" he asks Ahote.

"I'll find my way. You're the one who's lost."

"The wind takes you where *it* wants to go, Ahote. You need to find your own bearings."

Headlights and honking ahead. Faro tilts his wheel and swings the hearse out, popping up on the curb long enough for the oncoming traffic to pass between them, then he swings back as naturally as a pendulum.

Ahote picks up their conversation without skipping a beat. "You can't talk me out of this. Are you ready to use violence against a fellow traveler?"

"No, not yet, but I'm warming up to it." Faro spins his hearse around like a top and opens up the gas, but he can't quite pass Sweetness. Ahote grins at him across the median and tips his wheel left, pushing Faro onto the shoulder and into a street lamp. Just before impact, the hearse bounces off the curb like a jumping bean and barrel rolls over Ahote. Faro lands in the right lane as Sweetness pitches left.

Ahote veers back onto the road and hits the hearse at a steep angle, front bumper to rear bumper. The cars spin past each other as both driver's roll with the punch before regaining control. Back in the right lane, Ahote draws even. The vehicles arm wrestle down the thoroughfare.

A church looms ahead of them, its front doors perched on the corner of a fork in the road. Ahote lets the Ferryman push him right, but muscles him back over at the last second, sending him flying up the front steps. Faro blows the doors off their hinges and plows his way down the aisle. Pews fall like dominoes. He crosses himself as the hearse hits the altar steps and takes to the air.

Outside, Ahote pets the dash and whispers sweet nothings to his girl. He looks up as he passes the church... just in time to see the hearse explode through a stained glass window! It glides over the back lock like a black steel seraphim before landing in a kaleidoscope storm.

"Holy Christ on a stick!" It's the only blasphemy Ahote can conjure as the Ferryman slides onto the side street and roars after Sweetness. The hearse swings in behind and harries him down the boulevard. Faro flashes his lights,

swerves side to side, and otherwise acts like a man possessed. Ahote forces the pedal down, desperate to get this hellhound off his trail.

Half way across a bridge, the Faro gives up the chase. His hearse skids sideways and crashes through the masonry. The impact launches it into a graceful backflip. Faro lands on the railroad tracks below and vanishes into a rail yard.

Ahote drifts around the next corner and heads in the same direction, but the roads are a maze of blind turns and dead ends. When he finally pulls up to the police station, the hearse looks like it's been parked outside all night.

The harsh lights inside illuminate a scene of pure karma as two cops lift Faro by his arms and haul him towards the nearest cell. Ahote's smile tickles his ears. He marches up to the main desk and tells the officer on duty, "He's not a real priest. Can you arrest him for that?"

The flatfoot snickers. "Figures. Naw, he's just takin' a dip in the drunk tank. You know him?"

"Not really," Ahote answers, not wanting to guilt himself by association. "But he did tell me that he and this hobo friend of his are planning a bank robbery."

"Yes! YEEESSS!!!" Faro screams from down the hall. "A bank heist!! I told you so!! My friend told you so!! Why won't you listen?! I am the Hand of God!! I giveth and I taketh awaaaaay!!!"

"Not another one," the cop shakes his head as he waves an officer over. "Haven't you people learned your lesson about fire water?"

"What?" Ahote sputters. "No! I mean, yes. That's just offensive! I'm not drunk and that man *is* planning to rob a bank!"

"Sure, right after he kidnaps Jack Daniels."

"No, Jack's his partner! The hobo!" Ahote inches towards the door, but back-up is already on the scene. He's yanked off his feet and dragged into the station, right behind Faro. "Jack Daniels is a dangerous man!! You have to warn the bank!!!"

Back in the disaster area, Lotus gives Dante a peck on the cheek and whispers in his ear. The bathroom door opens behind them; Jack walks out with a wad of toilet paper crammed up his nose. He pours himself a drink, then raises his glass to Dante. "You got me pretty good, kid. Nice moves."

Lotus meets him in the kitchenette. "Jeez, Jack. Hittin' the sauce again already? Drunken Monkey, indeed."

"Ha!" Dante winces. Laughing hurts. "Drunken Monkey. That's you to a T, old timer!"

"Wadaya they call you? Dancin' Dante Twinkle Toes?"

"I'm the King of Swing, daddy-o."

"Nice," Jack rolls his eyes. To Lotus, "We should go over the plan, what there is of one. You wanna take it outside or stuff him in the closet?"

"No need. We can talk in front of him."

"You sure that's wise?"

"What's he gonna do?"

"Fair enough." They turn their backs to Dante, who quickly pulls one hand free, scratches his nose, and then resumes the position.

"There are only a few guards on the late shift," Jack explains in low tones. "The lobby should be empty. Faro will back his hearse through the front doors. That'll attract some attention, so we need to act fast. If you can handle the guards while I blow the vault door, it'll save us a ton of time."

Lotus arches an eyebrow. "This is seriously your plan? Crash through the wall and stuff the door full of dynamite?"

Dante hides his smile.

"It'll work, believe me. We did a test run a few days ago. It'll be fine."

"If you say so."

Dante coughs "*bullshit*," then looks innocently out the window.

"Anyway, I'll take care of the vault while you subdue the guards and any cops who drop by. Once I get the cash in the car, we're ghosts."

Lotus crosses her arms. "Then what? We wait around somewhere for the Tailor's sidekicks to show up?"

"More or less."

Lotus just looks at him, silent in her skepticism.

"They got drunken monkeys in the Caribbean," Dante cuts in. "Nasty, conniving, little bastards. They steal drinks right off the bar. Once, I caught one trying to swipe my rum frappe... Kicked it's ass."

"I doubt it." Jack doesn't indicate whether he doubts Dante's intent or his ability.

"Doubt it all ya want. That little punk didn't walk straight for a week."

Lotus hides her smile.

Ahote does a little soft shoe behind a curtain of bars. "See?" he asks the deputy sitting across the room. "Clearly not drunk. No harm done, easy mistake to make. Can I be released now? Please?"

The deputy snaps his newspaper and raises it up to cover his scowl.

"I've committed no crime! You have no right to keep me here! This is America, goddamnit!"

The deputy puts his gun on the desk next to him.

Ahote turns his back and slides down the bars until he's sitting on the floor. The Ferryman is perched on the cot next to an actual, passed out drunk. He steeple his fingers, taps them against pursed lips, and regards Ahote with eyes like arrow slits.

"So... you drive around America, roll into random towns, and assume it's your destiny to foul up whatever happens to be going on at the time?"

"I don't *assume* anything," the road shaman replies. "I see bad things happening to innocent people and I do whatever I can to help them."

"But you do make assumptions. You assume that Fate is leading you on this journey for a reason, that Fate has a plan. You assume that this plan is righteous and its outcome desirable."

"You don't believe the same?"

"I believe that time is a river and struggling against the current gets us nowhere, but that doesn't mean the river knows where it's going. Even when you're

swimming with the current, you have to choose your own destination. Knowledge is the only path to wisdom."

Ahote's mask of calm begins to crack. "Who's working from the position of ignorance, here?! You're willfully ignoring the possibility that you'll cause a run on the banks!"

"Good *lord*," Faro raises his hands to the heavens. "I've already explained about the damned FDIC! We're talking philosophy, now, not economics."

"Fine. It can't be a coincidence that we're both here at the same time, Faro, that Lotus brought you to me less than 24 hours before you planned to rob a bank. That's destiny."

"Maybe so, but who's destiny is it? Your problem, Ahote, is that you project human motives onto inhuman forces. Nature doesn't care about morality or justice! Its laws are primal: survival of the fittest, conservation of energy, action and reaction. If you want righteousness, it has to come from here." He jabs Ahote's forehead with one, knobby finger. "Just going with the flow gets you nowhere."

Ahote swats his finger away. "Have you ever wondered why you're having all this trouble catching the Tailor? If you're so enlightened, I mean? The righteous path never leads uphill. Maybe you're not meant to kill him." A shadow passes over Ahote's eyes. "Revenge and Justice are easily confused."

"We're not after revenge, Ahote, not really. I see the fates of the wrongful dead and I try to put their affairs in order. We're trying to save the Tailor's future victims, not resurrect the dead." The drunk stirs beside him. Faro pats his head and lulls him back to sleep. "We're on the same path, Ahote, I've just learned a few lessons you haven't. Let me tell you about the last road shaman who tried to play by the Tailor's rules..."

~

"He started tracking the Tailor back in '29, when we was still just a killer."

A man in a pin-stripe suit runs up to a plane as it taxis onto the runway. He climbs in as police lights begin to flash. Sirens rise in pitch as the cops close in, then fall as the plane leaves them behind.

"He was the fastest thing on the road, but he still couldn't catch the Tailor."

The cops' windows explode as a street demon blasts past them. Exhaust pipes curl out and over the sides of its engine like a ribcage, exhaling angry puffs of

steam. It charges at the plane, but too late. The Tailor drops a pair of fuzzy dice drop onto its hood.

"So the Tailor used him. He aimed the shaman like a gun, sent him against his enemies."

The demon car plows through a casino, tossing tables and chips everywhere. It spins between two rumrunners on a dark street, knocking them into buildings on either side. It stampedes across a roof and pounces on a motorized bandit trying to make his getaway.

"One night, on a stretch of lonely road, he stole the shaman's destiny."

The Tailor stands at a crossroads, hammering an iron spike into the center of some arcane sigil. The demon charges toward him like a lion running down its prey. The Tailor takes two steps back. When the car hits the iron spike, it nearly cuts the engine in half. Broken glass sprays all around the Tailor. Fire erupts from the depths of the car.

Brushing shards from his coat, the Tailor walks calmly over to the wreck. He pulls the driver's blood-soaked head off the wheel and whispers in his ear. "The only way you'll ever get this close to me is if I let you. Come work for me, wait for your chance."

The driver's eyes open. He weeps blood.

~

"He's been the Tailor's chauffeur ever since, a willing accomplice to countless crimes, but he still thinks he's on the righteous path. Can you guess the moral of this story?"

The drunk is now awake and listening intently. "A stitch in time saves nine?"

"Close, friend, but no." Faro places a reassuring hand on the old rummy's shoulder. "It's this: even if there is a Grand Plan, all you know for sure is that it's not your plan. If it's the Tailor's plan, trusting Fate won't take you anywhere you want to go."

"You sure this guy's not just a spook show?" Ahote replies. "You're making him sound like the devil himself."

"I met the devil at a crossroads once," announces the drunk. "Nice enough fella. Said he'd gimme one wish if I sold him my soul. I looked him right in the eye and

I said, 'Nuthin' doin', beezlebug! The good Lord gives me everything he sees fit.' Biggest mistake I ever made."

Faro puts a commiserating arm around the old man's shoulders. "The Tailor is no common criminal. He's a geomancer. He walks in the eye of his own karmic hurricane. As long as we let him dictate the rules, we'll never catch him. That's why we need to force his hand. This money is the only bait we can use and robbing this bank is the only way we can get it."

"First National Bank & Trust" sways in the wind. Below the sign, a man with spectacles and sweaty hands fumbles with his keys. He hears a gunshot and drops to the pavement, protects his balding head, but it was just a security guard tapping on the glass.

"Hi, Mister Parrish. Workin' on a Sunday?" Parrish straightens himself and tries to subtly wave the guard away, but poor sap's oblivious. "You shouldn't be working on a beautiful day like this. Let me get the door for..."

As soon as the lock clicks open, four armed men force their way inside, carrying Parrish along in their rip tide. Someone pistol whips the guard and abducts his gun. Two more guards emerge from a back room, but their bravado buckles when a tommy gun paints the ceiling with lead. Moments later, they're cowering on the floor beside the too-helpful doorman.

Three of the robbers show Parrish to his office while the fourth minds the hostages. They're all dressed in overalls that mark them as rail workers. Red bandanas cover half their faces. Grime covers the other half.

"Your guard was right," one of them tells Parrish. "You really shouldn't be here on a Sunday. Get those magic fingers movin' and we can all get back to church." Parrish opens the vault, then backs out of the way and covers his head. Again.

Two of the robbers invade with soon-to-be full canvas bags. The other stays with Parrish. "This really is God's plan, you know," he continues. "There's a storm comin' that's gonna cover our escape, so we got no need to kill you or your boys. Be thankful."

In the lobby, the lone gunman watches through the doors. "Holy shit," he whispers to himself. Then, louder, "Here she comes!" A locomotive rumbles over the building as the street vanishes behind a curtain of dust. The lights flicker, plaster falls. Sand curls in around the doors and windows. He calls back to his compatriots, "Shake a leg, fellas! She's a Dusey!"

Back in the office, the bagmen finish their work and hoist their plunder. The ringleader is just about to bid Parrish farewell when the lobby explodes inward. The doors slide in from the right and slam into the teller windows. The lone gunman goes with them. He bounces off the bars and joins the guards on the floor. The storm sings of sand and glass.

All three outlaws press through the door at once. They find the back end of a vehicle where the bank doors used to be. "What the hell?!" the ringleader curses. "Is that a hearse?!"

The sun is high in the sky when the once-and-future drunk shambles out of the police station. Faro and Ahote aren't far behind. Their souls are where they left them, parked on the curb.

"If you still gotta stop me, I guess now's the time." Faro spreads his arms wide and closes his eyes. "Take your best shot, just not the face or the groin. Those were gifts from God."

"I don't know," Ahote laments. "Maybe the FDIC insurance really will make it a victimless crime. Well, except for the intended victim."

"You can't be serious." Faro opens one eye. "The economic argument sold you?"

"No, but it's a legitimate point. Everything seemed so clear last night. I thought we were supposed to show people the path, not lead them into the weeds." It's clearly an accusation.

Faro drops his arms and puts a hand on Ahote's shoulder. "Anyone can show you a path. Some of us can even tell you what lies at its end, but you've got to know where you're..." He drifts off as if asleep at the wheel.

"What?" Then Ahote can sense it, too. Something's in the air, a rush of wind and a green tint.

"Black blizzard," they inform each other.

Now, Faro takes Ahote by both shoulders. "Folks will be stranded on the highway, Ahote. I've seen people suffocated in their cars and then buried alive. You should save as many as you can. You're the only one who can drive in this."

"What about you?"

"Like I've been telling you, Ahote... I'm going to rob a bank."

"First National Bank & Trust" swings wildly in the gale. A hearse plows through the storm, then box slides to a sideways stop facing away from the bank. Inside, the lone gunman watches red lights flare through the glass doors. He squints and edges closer, not sure what he's seeing.

The hearse backs through the bank doors and hits the gunman like a pool cue. He flies into the teller windows, hits his head with a *clang*, and slumps down on the floor. Jack and Lotus push their way inside; she tosses her hat in the car while Jack rushes ahead. When he sees the guards sitting in a circle, obviously disarmed, he slides to a stop.

"Huh."

Lotus finishes tying her hair and catches up just in time to draw her guns. Three bandits with two canvas bags and one hostage approach them from the bank manager's office. The hostage-taker shouts over the wind, "Whoever the hell you are, you're either too late or too early. You can have the place when we're done with it."

Jack puts his hands up and approaches them. "If we'd been any later, you'd be dead men walkin'. That money you're stealin' belongs to someone way above your pay grade. If you walk outta here with it, you'll be paintin' bulls-eyes on your foreheads."

"We'll take our chances, fella. Tell your daughter to put her guns away."

Jack looks cross. "Listen here, boy. I'm tryin' to be polite about this. Don't make me bend you over my knee." He takes another step forward.

The bandit presses his pistol into Mr. Parrish's jaw. "What's your take on this whole hostage situation, old man? If it's not working for you, I should just kill this guy now and free up a hand." He thumbs back the hammer. "Last chance to object..."

Lotus points her guns at heaven; Jack stops his advance. "Those canvas bags of yours are death warrants," Jack continues. "Even the mafia doesn't steal from the man who owns this bank. Let us take half of it and we'll draw all the attention. We want the man, not his money."

"We ain't negotiating a deal, here." The bandit nods to his partners and they go to collect their unconscious friend. As they bend down to hoist him up, one of the guards grabs a canvas bag and kicks its keeper in the jewels. The other guards grapple with the second bandit as he tries to bring a tommy gun to bear.

Lotus' eyes narrow as she focuses on the hostage-takers exposed eye, but it's not a gunshot that ends their stalemate. It's the sound of something huge as it clocks the hearse across the nose. The car spins around, taking another chunk off the front wall, and ends fully inside the lobby. What remains of the entryway is now blocked off by a mass of hoses, chrome, and red steel.

"What the hell?!" Lotus cries. "Is that a firetruck?"

Jack and Lotus are playing cards. Well, not so much playing as throwing. Jack and Lotus are throwing cards into the back of the hotel room door. Lotus holds a set of three between her fingers and launches them with a flick of her wrist. Each drives deep into the wood.

Jack empties a shot glass and draws the ace of hearts. "Five bucks says I can split one of 'em in two."

"Make it ten," Lotus replies.

"You just can't wait to loose all that money, can you?"

"Yeah, well, the previous owner was an ass."

Behind them, Dante's head lolls around like a bound balloon. He turns towards the window and his skull stops it's wandering. On the horizon, a wall of sand is eating the world.

"Hey, um... guys," he whimpers. No response. "Hey, old guys!" he shouts. "Somebody check the Bible. What time is the world supposed to end?"

The three of them stare out the window for a long moment, then Jack whirls like a Dervish and heads for the door. "We gotta go, boss. This is perfect. It's a sign... or an opportunity. Anyway, we gotta move." He plucks his hat off the rack and tosses Lotus her fedora.

"What about Faro? We don't have a car," she objects.

"I'm sure he'll reach the same conclusion and meet us there. It's just down the block. If we hurry, we might even beat the storm." He takes another look out the window. The End is visibly more Nigh. "Maybe."

"Be good while we're gone," she chides as they slip out the door. Alone with the storm, Dante lets out a long sigh. Then, with a little shake, he slips right out of the ropes. He stands, cracks his neck and loosens his joints, then picks up the

chair and hurls it out the window. The storm blows some of the glass back at him; it's already licking the edge of town.

Undeterred, Dante swings himself onto the exterior of the hotel and scurries up to the roof. He crosses to the other side in plenty of time to watch Jack and Lotus dash out the front door. He follows them down the street, bounding from one rooftop to the next. When they cross an intersection, he drops onto the top of a delivery truck and skips across a few moving cars like they were stones in a stream. Then, he jumps onto a storefront awning and reclaims the high ground.

He spots the "First National Bank & Trust" sign just before the storm swallows him whole.

The storm overtakes him in mid-air, between one building and the next. It consumes him like the ocean consumes the rain. The next roof vanishes from sight. His foot slips and plummets, but just manages to catch himself on a window sill. He swings through a pair of shutters, obliterating them.

He rolls through the wreckage and comes to his feet surrounded by large, angry men. The room appears to be some kind of barracks. Judging by the men's uniforms, it's a fire house. Storm winds billow through the now-open window as one of the firemen picks Dante up and tries to stuff him through it.

"Wait, wait, wait!" he yells with his limbs spread-eagle across the window frame. "It was an accident! I'd never cross firemen on purpose! I was a fire-fighter in Brazil!"

Another man taps Dante's aggressor on the shoulder. "That so?"

"Yeah!" Dante assures him. "Well, not officially, but I did rescue a woman from a burning building in Brazil." He pauses while they mull it over, but he just can't hold his tongue. "Technically... I *did* start the fire." The stuffing resumes. "Come on! It was an accident!"

Dante pulls in his limbs and lets the big guy shove him out, but keeps his fingers hooked around the inside of the window. He swings out and pulls his legs up, then kicks the fireman on the top of the head and slides down his back into the room. The other one tries to catch him, but Dante rolls under his outstretched arms and bolts into the hall.

Four of them follow him. With no staircase or window in sight, Dante heads for the fireman's pole. He swings around and kicks the front man in the chest, knocking them all down. Then he pulls in and slides to the ground floor. The first one to follow gets a fire extinguisher to the face. The second one down lands on said fire extinguisher, wrenching it out of Dante's grasp.

The King of Swing turns tail and runs towards a fire truck, slides underneath it. The firemen split up, one going around the front while the others flank. When the former pokes his nose around the fender, Dante breaks it with a brass nozzle. Then, he yanks the hose connected to that nozzle and leans back, letting it cruise over him and hit one of the flankers in the throat. The fireman chokes and stumbles backwards into his friend, who shoves him aside in his eagerness to get beat.

Dante flows around a few hooks and haymakers while he reels the hose in on his hands and feet. He whips it into a wide loop that lassos both of the flankers around their shoulders, then pulls it tight and slams their heads together. They hit the floor like falling timber.

Dante spares a moment for a quick celebration dance, then throws open the front doors. The storm slams against his chest, kicking him back into the garage. He turns around to clear his eyes and finds himself staring at a big, red fire engine. Suddenly, it's Christmas morning.

He hops into the driver's seat and finds the keys in the glove box. The truck sputters to life, lurches forward, and dives into an ocean of dust.

Sweetness' windshield is a dark blur of brown and black; it's like trying to see through a potato sack. Rather, it *would* be like that if Ahote had his eyes open. Instead, he's steering with his third eye and ten white knuckles.

"Ommmm" he whispers with each exhalation. "Ommmm. Shit!" His eyes snap open as a man materializes from the swirling sand. His head is down, one hand holding his hat while his other arm covers his face.

Ahote spins Sweetness around him. Her front wheel grinds the gravel an inch from his shoes; her chrome siding brushes past his blazer. Momentum carries the car as it skids to a stop a few feet behind him.

Ahote opens the door. "Hey!" he yells into a blast of sand. "The meter's running!"

When the hitchhiker pulls the door shut moments later, every inch of the dashboard, upholstery, and driver is painted in silt.

"Thank God," new guy exclaims between hacking coughs. "I left my wife and children in the car, back there somewhere, in a ditch."

Ahote turns the wheel and presses the accelerator. "Let's go get them. There's no sense in thanking God, though. I expect we'll have to do most of the digging ourselves."

Inside a tomb of American steel, a woman comforts her babies with cataclysmic verse. "Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him. Even so, Amen."

"Mommy?" Her little girl huddles atop the glove box, her back to a giant ant farm. The car, pitched forward into the ditch, is already buried. "When Jesus gets here, will we get bikes?"

Muddy tears run down the woman's face, drip onto the baby boy in her arms. "Yes dear," she sobs. "Everyone who loves Jesus gets a bike."

A beam of light ignites above them and shines down on the little girl's filthy locks. It widens as raw hands wipe away the sediment. A muffled warning reaches them through the gale before Ahote's elbow smashes through the rear window.

On the street, tiny dunes of sand have already started to form along Ahote's legs and back. He holds the husband's ankles as he reaches down into the tomb. The storm tries to swallow them. It has already swallowed everything else.

Elsewhere in the same murky black, Dante's fire truck scrapes the signs, benches, and masonry off the facades of several buildings. When it finally finds the bank, it collides with the hood of a hearse. The smaller vehicle spins sideways as it's shoved inside the bank. Dante slams on the brakes and the fire truck comes to a stop squarely in front of Faro's do-it-yourself door, cutting off their escape route.

Inside, Lotus and the hostage-taker quickly recover their composure. She sidearms a bullet; it squishes into the bandit's pistol right between the hammer and the chamber. The bandit tries to use Mr. Parrish as a meat shield, but Lotus is done with her guns. She throws a roundhouse kick into the bandit's knee, then grabs the back of his collar and hurls him through the office window.

Mr. Parrish runs, but not far. Half way across the lobby, Jack is playing hot potato with the other two bandits and a trio of guards. Every time he gets his hands on a bag of bills, they close ranks against him. Then, having retaken their booty, they all turn on each other and Jack takes it back.

Parrish runs headlong into the middle of this conflagration and catches a bag with his face. A bandit punches him in the gut and snatches the bag as Parrish doubles over. A guard pulls Parrish out of the fray as Jack leaps over them and plants both knees in the bandit's chest. They hit the ground together.

Another guard aims a stolen tommy gun at the back of Jack's head. The Drunken Monkey rolls backward and kicks the money bag at his attacker, who abandons his shot to catch the cash. Behind him, the third guard steals a fistful of bandit teeth; his punching bag tumbles into the tommy gun and they both head for the floor. Jack kicks the gun away and makes a grab for the cash, but his competition does the same. They hog pile on the money.

Lotus is on her way over when she sees Dante slither over the top of the truck and into the bank. He spends a moment fiddling with the many knobs and valves that encrust its side, then nabs the hose and hops through the hearse's passenger window.

Faro's standing next to the driver's side door, inspecting the damage. He ducks his head in and confronts Dante. "Hey! You parked me in, jackass!"

Dante threads the hose through the front and back windows, then slips into the back seat and dives out the driver's rear window. Faro tries to tackle him, but Dante's toes are already twinkling. He somersaults past the Ferryman and into a handstand, then kicks him into the side of his car. Faro bounces off and staggers into the lobby.

Lotus is on him like stink on jambalaya. Dante rolls under her first kick, a straight-line attack that puts a foot-shaped dent in the door. Her second kick is a roundhouse. Dante dodges back, then snags her ankle in the fire hose and hauls her off her feet. He catches her before she can catch herself. She tries to kick him in the back of the head, but he rolls his bone box out of the way just in time.

"You need some new material, girly girl. I've seen that one before."

Faro charges in like an angry bull. Dante hoists Lotus up to her feet, spins her around, and sends her flying into him. While they're extricating, he ties the hose around a door handle.

Lotus returns with piston fists. Dante ducks sideways and down; her punches track him to the floor, then lose him as he rolls under the hearse. On the far side, he cranks open a valve and pressurizes the hose. It seizes the hearse in python coils.

Something descends on Lotus through the swirling sand. She spins and intercepts it with her heel. A canvas bag full of money careens across the lobby and lands in

the office. "You were supposed to catch that!" Jack complains from the bottom of a heap.

One of the bandits breaks away with the other money bag and runs for the exit, such as it is. Dante pulls the ladder off the fire truck and introduces its business end to the bandit's windpipe. Lotus climbs over the hearse and tries to turn off the hose, but Dante loops the ladder over her shoulders and drags her away from the truck. She snaps her arms up and splits the ladder in twain, then catches each leg and twists them around with enough force to splinter the wood. The rungs shoot off in every direction.

Dante lets go and staggers back. The bandit, clutching his throat with one hand and his money bag with the other, resumes his attempt to leave. Lotus heads him off with a side kick that launches him into the air and leaves the money bag behind. His skull shatters the wall tile.

Lotus snags the bag and stuffs it in the hearse. Dante runs around the other side, recovers the bag, and tosses it into the office. He leans back as Faro throws an ill-conceived punch, then stuffs the shaman through the hearse's window.

"Where the hell's Ahote?!"

Eight miles away, but well within reach of a storm that touches five states, Ahote is trying to take a family home. "It has to be here somewhere," the husband frets from the passenger seat. "We passed the tree and the fence. It should be right in front of us."

Sweetness thumps into something. Her wheels slide in the sand. Ahote peers into the grainy not-night and makes out the silhouette of something pressed against the grill. "Is that... a chimney?"

The ground/roof collapses beneath them and the car drops into the family's sitting room. Dirt spills in through the doors and windows, fills the fireplace, and now it pours in through the ragged hole in the ceiling.

"Nuts to this!" Ahote aims for a broken window and revs the engine. "I'm taking you back to the hotel." He guns it up a sand dune, crashes through the window frame, and explodes back into the storm.

"Don't forget Hoover!" the little girl tugs at Ahote's braids from the back seat.

"That's our dog," her mother explains. She pries away the girls tiny fingers, but scrunches her nose at the fetishes in the shaman's hair.

"Where is he?" Ahote asks.

"Oh no," whispers the husband. "We left him tied up in the yard." He and Ahote trade looks, then both men dive out of the car and check the undercarriage. All clear.

They fumble around in the mirk, using Sweetness' headlights as a beacon, until Ahote hears Hoover barking. The dog's head is deep in a hole. It digs frantically to stop the dune from swallowing the last of its leash. A switchblade appears in Ahote's hand, slashes through the rope, and disappears like a magician's coin.

He runs into the husband on his way back to Sweetness, hands over a wriggling clump of dirt and tongue. They pile back inside the car. "I'm sorry, girl, but you'll never be clean again."

Hubby passes Hoover into the back seat. "What was that?"

"Nothing. Let's get back to town."

The road ahead of them is long and dark. It burrows under the storm, winds through the outskirts of Dodge, and passes by a bank that's seen better days.

The bandit ringleader shakes his head and sits up. The bank vault lies open and empty behind him. Broken glass litters the floor and two bags of money lie at his feet. He throws one over each shoulder and stands up. Out in the lobby... well, a lot of crazy shit is happening. He creeps towards the door like a cartoon burglar.

"Hey, idiots!" The Drunken Monkey yells from his vantage point on the floor. "The money's leaving!" Two guards break off from the melee and move to intercept, but their bandit counterparts catch them from behind and hold them back.

Behind them all, Jack flips onto his feet. He turns to his left and kicks the knee out from under one bandit. As he starts to fall, Jack pounds the guard in the chest and K.O.'s them both. Then, he hits the guard on his right with a back fist to the face; his skull snaps back and smashes the other bandit's nose. A flurry of punches finishes them off.

Meanwhile, Dante flies backwards across the lobby and catches himself on a teller window. He dives forward as Lotus' foot follows him and slams into the brass bars. The two of them land almost on top of each other. Dante catches her in a leg lock and brings her down to his level, but she manages to grab him by the throat. They're half way to a double homicide when the last of the guards gets his hands on the tommy gun.

He lets loose a spray of bullets that brings everything to a standstill... everything except the storm, which rages on outside, and Faro's frantic fiddling with the fire hose. Jack and the ringleader stop in their tracks. Lotus and Dante release their mutual death grips and get to their feet.

"Get in the vault, all of you!" the guard screams hysterically. "This shit is OVER!! As soon as the storm clears, you're all going to jail, got it?! JAIL!!!"

"Never spray a Thompson," Lotus scolds him. "They run through a clip in about a minute and that one's already been fired a few times. How many bullets you think you got left?"

"I told you to GET in the goddamned VAULT!!" Lotus eyes Twitchy's trigger finger and reaches for her guns, which sets him off. Twitchy, in turn, sets off the Thompson. Lotus shoots five bullets out of mid-air, swats two more away with the flats of her guns, and dodges an eighth before the tommy click click clicks.

She's across the room in a blink, tearing the Thompson out of his hands. She pushes him back and clocks him across the jaw with the rifle butt, Babe Ruth style. Blood and teeth arc out of his mouth as he flips heels over head and slams face-down on the ground.

Dante's already on the ringleader, who thought he saw a chance to make his escape. He grabs the money bags on the bandit's shoulders and pulls them back as he kicks one wing-tipped shoe into the man's spine, nearly folding him in half. The bags slip off as he crumples. Dante throws them both through the office window and into the vault.

Lotus manages to intercept one of them and tosses it back to Faro. It almost knocks the wind out of him. Dante's on him like a bad prom date. He grabs the bag and pushes Faro away with a slow kick to the stomach. He starts to swing it around for another throw, but Lotus puts a cork in that one. She latches on tight and they wrestle for it.

"What devil's run off with your brain, Dante Harrison Holloway?!" Her eyes oscillate between outrage and concern, unable to find equilibrium.

"Me?! You've had the crazies all night! You don't know jack about Jack or his pal, but you're gonna rob a bank with 'em and then... what? Go on the lam? Seriously?!"

"Not until you two stood me up, I wasn't!" She throws a few punches, but the wrestling has her off balance. Dante dodges with ease. Nearby, Faro finally convinces the hose to release his hearse. Jack emerges from the office with one

of the money bags, empties it into the back seat. "I wanted *all of us* to help them stop some killers."

"Right, you and him picked a fight with me on the dance floor in the name of justice!"

Lotus flips over his head, taking the bag with her. It pulls his arms up and back, so he spins like a rolling pin and tries to sweep her leg when she lands. Lotus blocks the kick with her shin, then brings her heel down on his foot. Dante's toes slide out of harm's way in the nick of time.

Their jitterbug is cut short when Jack unzips their money bag and lets its contents spill into its recently emptied brother. "Oh, fer fucksake!" Dante groans. He launches a kick at the Drunken Monkey, but Lotus blocks again. They let go of the bag simultaneously and set on each other in desperate frustration.

Jack kicks his money bag to Faro and plucks the empty one out of the air, then throws it over Dante's head like a hood. He gives the King of Swing a big, old bear hug. Lotus takes the captive's legs and they manhandle him into the vault.

"Stay in here 'til the storm passes, kid. I'd hate for you to get dust pneumonia on my account... well, 'hate' is a strong word." He leaves Lotus to say her goodbyes.

"We're not done, Dante, and I'm not mad. I think it's fair to say we both screwed this thing up. Just wait here for Ahote. He'll be able to catch up to us, I'm sure."

Behind her, Faro withdraws Lotus' fedora from the hearse and holds it up for Jack to see. Then, he tosses it through the office window and into the vault. Lotus turns around with a question on her lips, but Jack is already airborne. He slams into her with both feet. She hits the safe deposit boxes like a cue ball breaking a rack. Jack flips himself upright and leans into the door.

"Sorry, boss," he yells through the vanishing gap. "I'm sure it's for the best."

Faro backs the hearse against the office wall, as if getting a running start, and Jack hops in. The wheels squeal to life, tearing up tile and spraying debris before Faro releases the break. They rocket forward and punch through the side wall, box slide up against the neighboring building, and then rocket off into the storm.

The sun has abandoned the sky and orphaned the earth. Ahote struggles to focus his thoughts as backseat drivers, children, and a failed president run riot in his car. "Look out!" they shout, despite not being able to see a damned thing.

"Shit!" His eyes snap open as Death (or, more precisely, the Ferryman) coalesces out of the sand directly ahead of them. The hearse buries its nose in the road as Faro locks the front wheels. Its back end leaps up and continues forward, carrying the rest of the vehicle with it. The hood lifts off the ground just before Sweetness skids through its space.

Their windshields pass within feet of each other as the hearse somersaults over. Faro waves to Ahote. Jack clutches fistfuls of cash and screams in terror. The hearse completes its flip, lands behind Sweetness, and continues down its path.

The rest of the trip is silent.

When they pass by the bank and see its sorry state, Ahote has to stop. They drive in through the alley and park in the lobby. Ahote tells them he'll just be a minute, but the husband and the little girl tumble out anyway. The woman follows her daughter, baby boy in tow.

The vault door is closed, but not locked. The men wrestle it open while the woman tries to keep a tommy gun away from her daughter.

Inside, they find the lovers have mended their differences and then some.

Ahote, caked in dirt, regards them with the cool demeanor of a private eye.

"We'll be at the hotel."

He closes the door.

Broken glass crunches under black leather footsteps. He approaches the wreck slowly, deliberately, like a man approaching the gallows. He crouches down near the front window, now a hollow frame of warped steel, and finds the driver upside-down. His neck is being bent like a toothpick, squeezed between the ground below and the remains of the hearse above.

"I tried hard to avoid this," he tells the Ferryman. "You know I did. This was your path, not mine."

Faro's smile is an open wound, raw and bloody. "I've seen this moment coming for so long, it's like meeting an old friend."

"Why didn't you just back off and let me handle it?"

"Some mistakes, you have to make once... but only once."

Metal buckles, bone snaps. The vehicle collapses, pressing down like a palm on a pop can. Something ignites inside the engine and the hearse becomes a pyre.

A black silhouette walks away from the conflagration, back onto the road, and gets behind the wheel of a nightmare machine. Exhaust pipes wrap around its engine like a steel ribcage; its grill is a gaping maw. The behemoth vanishes into the night, leaving the Ferryman in the past.