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Spitfire

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Spitfire

Jerome was having a bad, bad day. He was clawing into the handle grips of his motorcycle, breathing fire and glaring at the red light in front of him, trying to make it explode with his eyes. He wanted to crush a skull with his bare hands and grind the chunks into pudding; he wanted to march into his boss's office bright and early tomorrow morning and put a bullet in him.

Jerome was having a bad, bad day.

“Hey!” a voice beside Jerome said. “Hey, you got a cig, pal?”

“No, no I'm sorry, I'm almost out,” Jerome said. His old, rusted Zippo lighter was digging into his leg through his pocket. He wanted to pull it out and hit the guy in the skull with it. A clean, calculated crack upon the head. He told himself that the man had nothing to do with his bad day as he knuckled his ill feelings under and responded as politely as possible. “One left,” he added with a feeble smile before turning his attention back to the light.

To the carload next to Jerome, he looked like what Chris, the driver, liked to call a “9 to 5 sissy,” all disgruntled from his cubicle job and spouse problems. Chris hated people like Jerome—“white collars” with their noses in the air to *real* workers like himself. Chris and his construction crew looked and laughed at the “sissy boy” Jerome, whose fireball of anger was shielded behind a white button-down shirt and helmet. Chris's buddies wondered whether or not that old bike had enough in it to give their Trans Am a good run for its money. They intended to find out. After all, the bastard shorted them a cigarette.

Jerome intended on getting home, cooling down with a cold Miller, and making love to his wife. Chris intended on beating the *sissy boy* in a race.

The light remained red as Chris sank his foot into the accelerator of the TA. Its 454 roared furiously, twisting itself in its restraints, trying to rip itself out of the car it was stuck in. The sound startled Jerome. He jumped up and looked over—he was so concerned with his own problems that he had not realized the one growing at his side. Chris's party erupted with laughter.

“HAH! What a woman! What a loser! What a *pussy!*!” one of them said.

“Unreal. Just calm down, just be cool,” the voice in Jerome's head said to him. The revving continued. Jerome knew how to handle these punk kids. *Just let them win and be on their way. Make it home to your Miller Light, make it home to Sarah, and she will make you forget all about this awful day.*

“Pussy! Ha-ha!” they shouted. Jerome hated that word. It fell sharp on his exhausted ears. Each of them respectively noticed the yellow light ignite on the perpendicular traffic light. Jerome's heart began pounding. He didn't know why, he didn't care to win anything. He had nothing to prove—his bike was fast, yes, but he did not buy it to go fast and kill himself on. *What would Sarah do?*

Chris would not let himself be made a “sissy” in front of his friends. He was committed. He was going to race a much faster vehicle and he was going to win, because he had more *balls* than some white collar. *Arrogant pricks*, he thought. *Bastard has a Kawasaki and I have a beat up '76 Trans Am.* “I'll show him. Watch—I'll introduce him to some American god damn power,” he said out loud.

“Hell yeah, come on, rev it!” the back seat of the packed car said to him.

Green.

A beat up 1976 Trans Am and five shouting young men exploded down the street behind a roaring engine. Jerome pulled his clutch in and shifted into first, beginning a smooth glide towards the speed limit and not a step further. Ahead he could see the taillights of his *friends* through a thick cloud of blue smoke. His anger was subsiding and transforming into dull frustration. In 20 minutes, he would be home, he would be with Sarah and she would make him forget. He shifted the bike into third and wondered where the cops were when you wanted them.

Down the road about a mile or so he noticed them again, in the right lane, traveling at just over half the speed limit. Jerome paid little attention and continued on his way, gliding past them and towards the Blockbuster marking the turn for his apartment. He focused on the road as the TA fell behind him in his rear view mirror. Just as he had predicted, the car began to drift into his lane and position itself right behind him. “Enough already...Jesus,” he said to himself, his voice carried away by the wind and over the primitive aerodynamics of the muscle car. A moment later, high beams blasted his bike, followed by the intimidating sound of acceleration. *I could hammer this bike*, he thought, *but I won't give them a reaction.*

“This punk just don't get it, does he? He stupid or sumthin? Chris, get up on his ass!” came from the back seat. Chris obliged, because he “*wasn't no sissy-man.*” He fed the monster more fuel and it lurched forward, fixing itself half a car length behind Jerome. Jerome's anger converted into concern, as he realized that the carload was clearly in the mood to cause problems. Figuring they weren't insane enough to ram him off his bike, and weren't stupid enough to cause an intentional accident, he decided he

would simply continue on his way, unthreatening and devoid of any would-be coveted reaction from him. But they did not stop, they kept following. Jerome's attention was drawn away from the situation directly behind him and on to one directly in front of him. A little yellow light in the shape of a gas pump was on his dash. His tank read dead "E," and he realized that in the last emotional ten miles he had not bothered to notice exactly how long that light had been on for.

"Wonderful," Jerome said as he concluded to do the only realistic thing he could do. Pull over and fuel up at the station ahead on his left. In a life or death situation, his bike could get him away from these people, but not without fuel. It couldn't do much without fuel. Jerome drifted into the catch lane and turned into the station, his friends directly behind him.

Jerome had trouble swallowing the idea of himself getting off his bike, pulling out his card, and fueling up his bike with them behind him. The station was deserted at this time of night.

Jerome pulled up to the pump and dismounted. Only when he stood up did he realize how hard he was gripping onto it, as if his life had depended on it. "Probably did," he said to the empty night and slid his card through the pump reader. Breathing heavily and shaking with excitement, he removed the nozzle, selected premium, and began to fuel his bike up.

Over the clicking and humming of the gas pump, Jerome keyed in onto the idling car as it drifted up behind him in the darkness. The noise merged with that of the gas pump so gradually he could hardly hear it. Only when the sound stopped did he notice a slight change in tone, like a bassist disappearing in the middle of an orchestra. He turned

around as slowly and carefully as possible. He did not want to look afraid, he did not want to look like a victim. After all, he was the angry one with the bad day on his shoulders.

Jerome stood, one hand on the gas pump and the other fumbling for the knife he forgot to bring as three, four, five people piled out of the Pontiac and began to stride directly towards him like armored cavalry, anger and determination in their eyes.

“Picked the wrong guys to mess with tonight, buddy, didn’t ya?” Chris said, his four friends walking alongside him with the devil in their smiles. He could see in their eyes that they were in no mood to be talked out of whatever it was they felt like doing tonight. A pack of dogs on the hunt for a fight, or rather massacre. Chris stood in front of him, framed between the pump and Jerome’s bike. His friends had assumed the surrounding positions and had him cornered from every direction, in lunging range if he were to try to make a break for it on his bike. Jerome could see no possible way of getting himself out of this situation. He had forgotten his knife, his only form of possible protection at this point. He reached into his pocket to check again. Nothing but an empty pack of cigarettes and an old, rusted Zippo. At the sight of this, Chris withdrew a switchblade and snapped it open. One of his friends revealed a pair of brass knuckles. “*Oh god,*” Jerome thought, swallowing hard, the thick smell of gasoline seeping in through his nose and down into his lungs. He didn’t know whether to attribute his feeling of nausea to his situation or the sickening odor of octane. “*Gasoline...ugh,*” he thought. His attackers began to take their steps forward.

...gasoline!

A 10,000-watt light bulb lit up and exploded above Jerome's head. In a split second his gaze left Chris's and fixated on his right hand, holding the pump as it shoveled gasoline into the tank of his bike. He lifted the nozzle up, spraying gas everywhere, and turned it on Chris. He aimed it at him and fired, dousing him with 93-rated octane. Chris fell back, holding his eyes and shouting. Jerome turned and respectively coated each of them with half a gallon of gas, encompassing himself in a ring of super flammable liquid. One by one they staggered backwards, shielding their eyes and coughing heavily from the fumes. Jerome disengaged the pump, standing in awe at his rash action, looking at how quickly his big intimidating attackers transformed into feeble, acid-covered heaps of flesh.

"OH MY . . .," Chris said from behind him. Jerome swung around and looked at him, pump in hand. Chris had managed to bring himself to his feet, his eyes glowing puffy red with both anger and caustic liquid.

"I am going to kill you," Chris said. "I'm going to cut your throat!" Jerome turned to assess his situation with the others. Although deterred by means of surprise, they were not incapacitated by any means. The only difference between now and seven seconds ago was that they had viable reason to be angry as hell at him. That, and . . .

As they began to rush towards him, Jerome, using his free hand, reached into his pocket, pulled out his rusted Zippo, clicked it open, and struck a flame.

Chris's heart exploded. He leaned back on his heels, slipping and falling. The others turned back so fast they lost balance as well, scampering around on all fours, fighting for balance like rottweilers on wet tile floors. Their once commanding eyes now beamed utter fear. Chris's friends managed to slither out of the gas pool and bolted,

sobbing, covered in gasoline, running for their worthless lives. Chris, on the other hand, was not as fortunate. His fall was a substantial one, shattering his left knee on impact. He laid there, terrified, soaked from head to toe at the feet of the “white collar sissy,” squirming like a filthy pig in a bath of mud. Jerome let out a heavy, dark laugh, intoxicated with the octane fumes and the power they brought, knowing that at any point the gas to air consistency could reach just the right point and his half-inch Zippo flame would send the place sky high. He peered down at Chris and said as calmly as possible, “Looks like your lucky day, buddy. I’ve got *one* Marlboro left with your name on it.”