

SWEETBLOND2015:

*Whatever you can fit in your trunk,
we'll take it and put it in my RV.
There's plenty of room x :)*

SWEETBLOND2015:

You got the money, my love?

SWEETBLOND2015:

*You won't need anything
else once you're here. :)*

SWEETBLOND2015:

Don't be late. 1 AM. I mean it. x

SWEETBLOND2015:

Love you! xxx

SWEETBLOND2015:

:)

SWEETBLOND2015 has left the conversation.

KAVIN90210:

Okay, great!

KAVIN90210:

*'Course I got the money!
Baby, I'm made of money!*

KAVIN90210:

On my way.

KAVIN90210:

I'm leaving now. x

KAVIN90210:

Love you!

KAVIN90210:

*Wait! How will I
know it's you?*

KAVIN90210 has left the conversation.

Kavin scrupulously watched the numbers roll on the gas pump reader, making sure to not overflow his budget.

The gas station's cold fluorescent lights beamed down on his neatly-combed coarse black hair. His tattered shearling jacket was buttoned all the way up, but the upturned woollen collars hardly covered his severe, near-black birthmark. Sprouting charcoal-coloured hair, it stretched across the majority of his face, covering his left ear and blending into the hair on his scalp. Beneath his winter layers, the birthmark jacketed his entire torso and left arm down to the fingertips; its texture was shag like an aged German shepherd. The black hairs wisped and swirled like an oil spill in a serene Norwegian fjord.

A distant, thunderous engine of a muscular motorcycle quickly grew louder as it pulled into the gas station, veering around Kavin and stopping outside right of the convenience store.

Kavin discreetly watched the leather-clad couple settle and slip off their helmets. The woman in the rear shook out her bleached-blond hair and let her helmet swing from her left hand, while her heavily-pierced man hopped off his peeling saddle and dashed into the store. Kavin noticed she was stunning despite her wild hair and sweat-gleamed face. She looked like the typical femme fatale from a 1980s glam-rock music video. Her punk tattoos and finger-daubed makeup only added to the visage. Kavin looked away before the girl noticed he was there.

The man burst out of the store boot first with a hotdog and a beer can. He cracked the can open with one hand and chugged, and the other hand fed the hotdog to his girl from above, like a mother bird. Kavin focused on the climbing numbers . . . \$18 . . . \$19 . . . \$19.50 . . .

He fiddled with the pump's trigger, rolling up pennies on the reader with the precision of a fighter pilot marking his target.

Suddenly, something smacked Kavin on the side of his face, latching onto his collar and folding it to reveal his birthmark. Kavin looked down, for just a moment, to see the crushed beer can rattle at his feet.

'Holy, shit!' the girl laughed. 'Did ya see that?'

Kavin chose to ignore them, the way he did nearly everyone else in

life, and turned back to the numbers. \$22.80. Ah, shit! he thought, having seen the numbers spin past his desired total. He yanked out the nozzle and jammed it into its metallic holster.

He emptied the pockets in his jeans with a struggle and pulled out a fistful of paper, separating dollar bills from old receipts. Twelve bucks. Shit.

Kavin surreptitiously glanced back at the couple who were no longer interested in him. Fortunately, they seemed more absorbed by each other. Sneakily, Kavin reached inside his jacket and pulled out a dense envelope. It was as thick as a Bible with crushed corners, and the word 'Future' was scrawled on it in black marker. He quickly peeled the flap open revealing a rugged row of bills, and then slipped out a twenty and added it to his personal fund. The envelope was stashed as quickly as it was retrieved.

As Kavin twisted his fuel cap back on, he looked up across the lot to the bikers. Only the girl remained, slinked over the fuel tank. She was watching him like a leopard in the leaves.

Kavin stared back for a second too long when a sudden thump split the back of his dome. The aftershock of what felt like a bolt of lightning buckled his knees, and on his way down he was grabbed and flipped. In his spinning vision, the fierce biker wielding a rusted wrench swam above him. Kavin's body was ransacked by what felt like several hands—his pockets were ripped apart, sending his phone and keys skittering; his jacket was torn open, and the envelope was snatched from him—but Kavin clung on dearly for the bills already in his clasp. He knew that at the very least, all he needed was enough to pay for gas so he could get to his destination. Finally, there was a loud crunch beside his head, followed by heavy footsteps retreating off into the distance.

Suddenly, it was over. Kavin lay there, dazed and choked up by the fumes of evaporated gasoline, as he heard the whoops and cheers of the couple echo in the lot. The motorcycle rumbled to a start, skidding out of the fluorescents of the gas station and onto the highway. Kavin watched the taillights of the roaring machine swim away as he staggered to his feet. And despite the pain from the rear of his cranium gunning to the

front, he headed toward the store.

Kavin stumbled into the glass door, catching the attention of the acne-blasted store clerk. A customer exited and held the door open for Kavin to enter.

‘Ay! Wolfman!’ the clerk shouted, with arms lifted like a sideline referee. ‘Godsend!’

‘I gotta use your phone—‘

‘Can you do me a solid?’ the clerk asked, hurrying out from behind the counter. ‘I’ve been dyin’a take a piss for an hour; I’m out of empty bottles!’ He was already at the restroom door with his chunky skater shoes tapping when he shouted, ‘Just ring yourself up. I trust you, bro!’

Kavin trudged in behind the counter and picked up the corded phone, noticing the three piss-filled soda bottles shelved underneath. That and the equally bright fluorescent lights inside exacerbated Kavin’s nausea. He dialled nine-one-one, and while it rang, he opened his locked fist to pay the fee on pump four.

‘Nine-one-one, what’s your emergency?’

The cash register pinged open and a lake of sage-green bills stared up at him. Immediately, Kavin saw his problem vanishing. The clerk was engaged, the store was empty, and the parking lot was deserted. Finally, he looked up at the high corner behind him to see the security camera dangling by its wire like a spider’s last kill. The sound of piss gushing in the bathroom was a timer, and the clock had already begun. But Kavin was frozen as if hypnotised by the subtle crackling and background voices in the phone.

‘Nine-one-one? Are you there?’

The toilet flushed and, without thought, Kavin bolted into action. He ripped out the bills from each compartment and shoved them deep into his surviving pockets.

‘Hello? I can hear you breathing. Are you hurt?’

The bathroom door swung open, and Kavin slammed the drawer shut. The remaining dimes and cents rattled inside. The clerk stepped out to Kavin, frozen against the phone receiver.

‘Hello? Can you hear me? Is anyone there?’

Thinking fast, Kavin improvised, ‘. . . Okay, thanks. I’m on my way,’ he said, hiding the tremble in his voice.

‘Sir—’

The phone hit the cradle, and Kavin looked over at the clerk standing at the restroom door.

‘You good, bro?’ the clerk asked.

‘Yeah,’ he replied, casually wiping his sweat-beaded brow. ‘You?’ He believed the clerk heard his heavy gulp.

At that moment, the door chimed as two police officers strutted in. The clerk was very attentive to them—despite the anti-authoritarian message printed on his band tee—simultaneously welcoming them in and beckoning Kavin out from behind the counter. Kavin turned away inconspicuously as he passed the officers. The clerk made nice with the boys in blue, and Kavin hurried around their large police cruiser parked right outside and hustled back to his car.

The shell of his ’86 Ford Festiva permitted little room for elbows and knees before, let alone now that it was filled with nearly everything he owned. Kavin poured out his pockets onto the passenger seat and counted his loot at a glance. He was leaving with a few hundred more than he’d arrived with, but then he received a sudden pang of guilt piercing beneath his sternum. Looking back at the store, he watched the officers stroll through the aisles holding Slushies, and then his gaze ended on the clerk. The clerk looked over and Kavin’s heart stopped. The teenager playfully flipped his middle finger up at him, and then smiled and waved earnestly. Holy Christ, Kavin thought as he waved back. His ignition stuttered to a start and with one spin of the wheel, he was back on the road.

His worldly possessions rattled in the back beneath a heavy dust sheet as his little red hatchback hummed on the open road. Jagged rocks and tall trees shot past the window, and the small mountain of things in the back seat completely blocked Kavin’s view of the real mountains of Boulder, Colorado—but he kept his eyes on the future, ready to start his new life with his online love.

He lightly dabbed the back of his head and felt the moist sting of the

deep gash amplify between his ears. His foot pressed harder on the pedal so he could sooner seek out a bandage, or a kiss—as well as be on time as per *Sweetblond's* wishes. This is crazy! he thought, with a wide grin. He counted the strips of white on the highway to keep him alert, and within fifteen minutes, he was on a winding dirt road surrounded by towering Douglas firs and blue spruces. Seeing nothing outside of the glare of his already-dimmed headlights, he slowly crept down the narrow path, pebbles and twigs quietly crunching and cracking beneath his tyres. Finally, he reached a clearing. Kavin cautiously pulled in and around, hugging the perimeter, and then finally stopping and shutting off the engine. Crickets trilled outside the vehicle, and the odd bird occasionally muttered something in its sleep.

A brand new beige motorhome was parked across the clearing at the other edge of the forest. A bright red strip cut through the length of it ending on an italicised *SEARCHER* emblazoned on the rear. The lights were off inside, but glints of moonlight shimmered across the aluminium detailing around the window frames and along the top edges of the campervan. Looks just like the photo, he thought.

Kavin's heart raced as he internally battled against reversing at full speed out of there. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath and then exhaled a faint cloud that vanished as quickly as it came. He gathered the cash on the passenger seat into a neat stack, quickly inspected the surrounding dark trees, and then, when satisfied, he hid the wad of cash in the gap beneath his seat. His watch beeped for one o'clock; it was the only thing louder than his breathing.

The campervan rocked slightly, and then the door opened. Out stepped a tall, blonde-haired man, chiselled by a Greek god as a gift for another. His presence flashed like a starburst in the deep black of space, washing away any trepidation Kavin harboured. He looked over to the rusted hatchback in the grassy expanse and gently waved to Kavin like royalty. Kavin's nerves melted away and dripped off his black fur as he switched off his headlights, opened his door, and clumsily lifted his lead-filled shoes out of the footwell.

Thanks for reading. <

*The entire short story is available upon request or online at leading eBook
stores...*

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