Strangers

by T. J. Hundtofte

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NATHAN MAUBRAY (32), shaggy good looks with a natural chutzpah about him, runs beneath the awnings of a desolate platform.

He stops at a big yellow board for scheduled arrivals and runs his finger down the time plan.

Exhausted, he gasps for air and checks his wrist where his watch should be.

NATHAN

Shit...

Nathan glances around the empty platform, a ghostly serenity fills the night air.

A solitary man in a dark mackintosh sits with perfect posture on a bench. JEFF (45), a thin-haired, inconspicuous man with the calm, droopy eyes of a suicidal bloodhound.

He looks to his watch. Nathan walks over.

NATHAN You got the time?

JEFF

4:15.

Nathan scans the arrivals again and pulls out a pack of cigarettes from his breast-pocket.

JEFF Miss your train?

He frisks his pockets for a lighter.

NATHAN No, I made it all right. Turns out I got 10 minutes to spare. (pauses) You got a light?

Jeff pulls out a lighter and lights Nathan's cigarette.

JEFF So what were you running from?

Nathan puffs out in a grin.

NATHAN Who says I was running from anything? Well, for one you're scrambling to catch the 4:30 AM train like it's the end of the world.

He takes a seat on the bench and slouches back with a cheeky grin.

NATHAN Well maybe it is? You never know.

Jeff averts his eyes. A peculiar smile forms at the side of his mouth.

NATHAN Let's just say I'll be happy to leave this shit-hole behind.

JEFF Spoken like a true Yinzer.

NATHAN

Nah, New Yorker - born and raised. That's where I'm going now. I got a kid I haven't seen in a few months waiting for me. She's turning 10 next week. (drags cigarette) I just had some stuff I needed to sort out here first. Ancient History.

Jeff looks knowingly away -- the shadow of a smile.

JEFF Girl or money?

Nathan cracks a smile.

NATHAN Bit of both. But mostly money.

JEFF

I hope you took care of it. Some people take that stuff very seriously. Believe me, I know.

NATHAN Story of my life. But like I said, it's ancient history. Water under the bridge.

Jeff nods, he's not gonna pry.

JEFF

I got kids too. Two girls down in Miami.

NATHAN Yeah, how old?

JEFF They're all grown now. (pauses) Time passes by like you wouldn't believe. Until one day you realize you don't even know who they are anymore. Who you are.

He feigns a smile.

JEFF

If you want some advice, don't ever let anything come before your kids. Nothing. You'll regret it.

Nathan flicks his smoke onto the ground and quenches it with his shoe.

NATHAN

Duly noted.

JEFF

To them I was probably the most boring man in the world. I was an insurance auditor for 15 years, but that was never what I really wanted to do.

NATHAN Yikes, can't say that I blame them.

JEFF It's not who I am anymore. I'd like to think we're not our dayjobs. You know? We are what we do when the lights go out at night.

NATHAN You're very zen-like for an auditor, anyone ever tell you that?

Jeff "Hmms" quietly.

JEFF I've been told I'm a good judge of character, if that counts? (pauses) What do you do? NATHAN

I guess I'm a writer. Or that's what I'm gonna be at least. I write.

JEFF Fiction or non-fiction?

NATHAN Fiction, I suppose.

JEFF See, I never cared much for fiction. To me it's all lies if it ain't the truth. Not that the truth matters much in our line of work anyway.

Nathan wrinkles his brows as he takes another drag off his smoke.

NATHAN Seems to me if the truth doesn't matter to an auditor, you lose your job...

JEFF I told you, Nathan, I don't do that anymore.

Nathan frowns, taken aback.

NATHAN How'd you know my name...?

Jeff's stare penetrates him, suddenly all-knowing, all-wise.

A terrible realization spreads over Nathan's face. Jeff turns and looks casually into the air.

JEFF Please don't try and run or anything like that. I just had a full meal.

Nathan sends a catatonic stare into thin air. His eyes then dart about.

NATHAN (stutters) Look, whatever they're paying you-

JEFF -You'll double it. Triple it. Quadruple it. Yes. (MORE) JEFF (cont'd) Money's never an object when you're staring down the barrel of a loaded gun. Metaphorically speaking, of course. (pauses) At least for a few more minutes.

NATHAN

Please, you don't have to do this. You could've missed me, I could've gotten away. No one has to know.

Jeff averts his eyes with an expression somewhere between disdain and disgust.

Nathan turns with an indignant look on his face.

NATHAN They tell you why? Do you even know what it was I did, that I have to die?

JEFF They didn't say and I never thought to ask.

NATHAN

I never killed anybody, if that's what you think. I never stole anything from no one, I never even cheated on my tax-returns.

JEFF Maybe you hurt somebody's feelings? It's all very complicated.

Nathan sinks his head in his hands.

NATHAN

Please, these people...I made a mistake, I realize that, but it's not worth dying for. It's not fair. Oh God...

Jeff looks him straight in the eye.

JEFF You're not a killer, I see that. The shake in your hand, the look in your eyes tell me this is probably the most scared you've ever been in your entire life. Which means you couldn't know what it is to take a life, and you never will. Not people like you. (MORE) JEFF (cont'd) (pauses) I was like you once, you know.

The silver Am Trak train shines its headlights through the morning gloom just outside the station.

JEFF

Ah! Here's your train now ...

Jeff gets up in front of Nathan and pulls out a chrome semiautomatic from inside his mackintosh.

Nathan jumps, hyperventilating.

NATHAN You're gonna shoot me...here?

JEFF

Tell you the truth I don't really care for guns, they're so loud and impersonal, makes it all seem so very easy. (shrugs) But all I brought is a Smith & Wesson, and I have no intention of bludgeoning you to death. You know how hard blood is to get out of a magazine?

Nathan's face crumples up, tears flowing freely.

NATHAN Please, there must be something you want. Anything. I don't wanna die.

Jeff calmly attaches the silencer to his pistol.

JEFF You know, there are things in this world - and I believe this to be true - there are things in this world worth killing for, and then there things worth dying for. Two very different things, mind you. Most people have no problem committing to a kill, but I think actual self-sacrifice is a rare and beautiful thing. It puts a real sense of awe in you.

The vacant train makes its approach into the station with a loud rumble. Jeff aims the silenced gun square at Nathan's head.

JEFF This is it, Nate. Are you afraid? Nathan squirms, shuts his eyes and sobs in the presence of certain death.

NATHAN (garbled)

Yes...

JEFF Don't be. "Do not fear death so much, but rather the inadequate life." I read that once on the back a cereal box. It does have a nice ring to it.

Suddenly Nathan falls to his knees, begging on the cold tarmac. He grabs on to Jeff's trench-coat.

NATHAN

(stutters) No! Please, I have a little girl waiting for me, you have no right to take me from her! You have no right!

A beat.

Jeff lowers the gun and looks curiously at Nathan.

JEFF Did you mean what you just said? Before? Would you do anything to get out this?

NATHAN

Yes. Anything.

Jeff lets his gaze wander over him, as if appraising a bruised antiquity.

JEFF If I let you go, I want you to promise me something. Can you do that?

Nathan looks up in disbelief, tears in his eyes.

NATHAN

Yes...

JEFF I want you to do something for me. I want you to take a life. Anyone. Anywhere. Doesn't matter. One life, for yours. Within the next 24 hours.

NATHAN

What...?

JEFF

I want you to kill someone else, could be a complete stranger, could be your 4th grade math teacher, but I want you to kill this person to save yourself. A life for a life.

JEFF

If you do this, you will never see me again. But if you don't, if you break your promise, in any way, I will find you and I will kill you. Only after I've killed your 72-year-old father, your estranged sister in Connecticut, your ex-wife Tracy along with her new husband Bob and his kids, and of course your beautiful daughter Caley who will be ten next week, waiting for you in New York

NATHAN

(sniffs) Don't you fucking touch her...

JEFF

Make no mistake, there is no atonement here. They'll send someone else to finish the job. They'll hunt you to the end of the earth and beyond. And whatever promises I just made, they will top. They will kill anyone you've ever loved, anyone you've ever had a wet dream about. Your high-school crush, the cute girl in the video-store, people you think only you and God know about.

(pauses) At best, I'm offering you a postponement, not an out. Those are the terms. Can you live with them? With what you have to do?

Nathan grits his teeth in an unbearable dilemma.

JEFF

Of course you can make everything a whole lot simpler, if you go quietly right here and now. Step up, pay the price. (MORE)

JEFF (cont'd) No misunderstandings. Just you. Caley's name will never come up. Nathan looks up, beady eyes, a moment of clarity. NATHAN How will you know if I've done it? Jeff sighs, almost disappointed. JEFF I'll know. Nathan gestures a nod. NATHAN Okay... JEFF I want you to look me in the eyes and say it. Nathan looks up, all teary-eyed. NATHAN Yes, I will do it. JEFF Swear it. NATHAN T swear! Jeff gives Nathan a look of immense disappointment as the train screeches to a halt with a deafening mechanic howl. He raises his shooting arm and pulls the trigger as if it was nothing. A muffled shot rings out and Nathan's head snaps back in a spatter of blood.

His lifeless body slouches to the side and collapses on the ground. Jeff crouches down and looks into Nathan's glistening dead eyes.

JEFF You won't understand this now, but I just saved your daughter's life. She will turn 10 next week, while you don't get any more birthdays. I think, in the end, you'll see it's a fair trade. A life for a life. (pauses) See, I don't just take life, Nathan. I grant it, to those who deserve it. Jeff holsters his side-arm inside his jacket and gives Nathan one last resigned look.

JEFF Her life was never yours to risk, Nate. You should've realized that.

He then turns and strolls towards a set of stairs leading back into the station. He disappears at the top.

FADE TO BLACK

THE END