


GHOST IN THE ROAD

By Wil C. Fry IV 

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The fog was thick, like water-flavored cotton candy, as it sped by the open windows of the truck. I'd just found a comfortable posture in the passenger seat, hunkered down against the moist cold.

Allen was driving a little too fast for conditions, and we almost didn't see the emergency lights until it was too late. Blue, red, orange and yellow beacons rotated hyperactively, sending out arms of light through the fog. But Allen's a decent driver, and we slid to a halt just feet away from the scene, pulling off onto the narrow shoulder. The swirling arms of light surrounded an enclave of vehicles, only one of which meant anything to me.

In the midst of the ambulances, police cars, fire trucks and onlookers, were three wrecked vehicles, and one of them was mine. Crap.

"Crap!" I said to Allen. "That's my car."

My lips were numb as I talked, as much from the alcohol as from the cold.

"What about Kelli?" he asked.

"Oh." I felt a little guilty, just for a second, that I'd thought of my car before my girlfriend. But I'd been thinking of my girlfriend all night, every time I watched her flirt with another man in the night club, and every one of those minutes she'd been out of my sight, I'd wondered where she was and what she was doing.

As expected — by everyone but me, I guess — our night at the bar had ended with Kelli and I arguing again. Finally, she'd said, "Just take me the hell home," and I'd gotten a little hateful. "Here, just take the car," I'd said, handing her my keys.

That was the last time I'd seen her, about 25 minutes before, as she turned away from me and stomped out of the crowded building. Now, here was my car, sitting on the road, with a hateful red liquid blur across its cracked windshield.

"Kelli!" I suddenly cried, and I was out of Allen's truck like a dog that's slipped its leash. I didn't get far, though.

A burly firefighter threw out an arm that effectively reversed my progress; in fact, I fell backward onto the damp, slick pavement.

"Sorry man," he said, reaching out to help me back up, "but you can't go over there right now."

"My girlfriend ..." I began, but saw the look in his eyes.

I nodded to the fireman, and looked back at Allen. He was stepping out of the driver's door, lighting up a smoke from my pack of cigarettes. I held out my hand, and Allen tossed the pack to me. I caught it neatly, extracted a white tube, and lit it, adding my own gray cloud to the still thickening fog.

Allen, waddling his bulk over to me, peered through the multi-color haze. "It looks bad," he noted quietly. I didn't know how to reply.

Behind us, another set of swirling lights pulled up; we saw that it was a red SUV, marked "State Medical Examiner." Another bad sign.

A man about my age slipped from the vehicle carrying a black leather satchel. What kind of person picks that as a career? I guess you'd get used to it.

The medical examiner was ushered quickly to the center of the scene, and he bent down behind the opposite fender of my car. Men and women were walking quickly around the scene, wearing uniforms, talking quietly. Everything was hushed, either from the fog, or the situation, or both.

Not sure what to do, I turned around, staring out through the fog. Where are we? I wondered. I looked for a driveway or a house, but could see neither. Just somewhere on Highway 91, between Frank's Oasis and my trailer house. I sat down on the rear bumper of Allen's truck, leaning up against the tailgate. Surrounded by the close cave walls of the hovering fog, everything was completely silent there, only 40 feet or so from the activity in front of the truck.

Looking up, I thought I saw a figure walking across the highway, back in the darkness through which we'd just driven. It was just for an instant. When I squinted to look closer, nothing was there. But something was there; my skin was crawling. I don't have any hair on the back of my neck, so it didn't stand up like in the cliché, but I felt that it would have if I'd had any. I felt a ... a presence, I guess.

Then, suddenly, I saw her. She was standing out in the fog, barely visible.

"Kelli?" I whispered, then rose to my feet a little drunkenly.

Using the colored emergency lights for illumination, I took several more steps in her direction. She wasn't looking at me, but I knew who it was. Her casual posture, her long dark hair, flipped about by the wind. I recognized the shapes of her shoulders, her hips, and the blouse she'd been wearing tonight.

Walking away from Allen's truck, I went toward her, but it seemed that she remained the same distance from me.

"Kelli, is that you?" I shot out. The voices from the accident scene behind me were almost inaudible now, so I didn't think they could hear me, either. But surely one of the officers would want to talk to her.

Then I had a gallant thought. To keep her from being arrested for driving under the influence, I could go up and tell them I had been driving. No, that wouldn't work. How would I explain the blood on the windshield?

"Kelli?"

She seemed to be fading now, as a thick swath of fog lay between us, weaving in the light breeze. I shivered. Just as I lost sight of her, though, I heard her voice.

"I'm sorry, Mike." It was just a whisper, but it was definitely her voice.

"For what?" I called back. "We just had a little disagreement. You know I don't hold grudges."

"No," I heard her say. "I'm sorry." It was that low, firm tone that she uses when she's absolutely right, and she's had a long time to think things through.

"Okay, baby," I said. "I forgive you. Just follow the sound of my voice, and come to me. Allen will give us a ride home. His truck's right over here."

"No," she said again, then repeated, "I'm sorry, Mike."

I started to feel the frustration building in my brain. Sometimes, she could be so obstinate, and even a supercomputer couldn't understand the way her moods changed. A few minutes ago, in the club, she'd been fiery, adamant, and a more than a little ticked off. Now, she sounded subdued, recalcitrant, and even a little ... morose?

Taking a few more steps into the fog, I noticed that the flickering police and ambulance lights were almost invisible now. I saw her shape again, stepping across my path, just a few feet in front of me.

Leaping forward, I reached out, hoping to grab her shoulder. She was probably just stunned from the accident and needed a sure hand to guide her back to the scene. But I missed. Turning around, 360 degrees, I didn't see her anymore.

"Just come to me," I pleaded. "Let's just go home, Kelli."

"I can't, Mike. I can't go home."

The voice was a soft whisper, floating on the wind, like when you overhear a conversation from a hundred yards away, only because everything else is totally silent.

"Why not?"

No response.

I took a few more steps, crushing out my finished cigarette on the damp pavement. Keeping my eyes alert, swinging my head back and forth, I pulled out another smoke and lit it, drawing deeply.

"Come on, baby," I cried, a little more desperate now. If she kept wandering around out here, she might get hit by the next car that came up on the wreck. "Let's just sleep it off. I'm over it, Kelli. I just want you. That's all."

Then I smelled her perfume. I'm not sure of the name, but it's just the right mix between vanilla, lilacs and something else that I can never quite place. The smell somehow brought back the sharp memory of our first meeting.

Nine months ago, I was sitting at my normal table in the back of Harry's Oasis, one of the smallest night clubs on this side of the city, finishing off a beer. My friends had wandered away from our table, playing pool, dancing, getting more drinks, visiting the restroom for the tenth time that night. I found myself alone at the table, when that perfect scent had floated by, catching my attention. I'd turned around, seeing that the table behind me also only had one occupant — Kelli. A tiny little thing she was, only a hair over five feet and barely a hundred pounds. Her back was to me. "Care to join me," was what I had said to her. Not a very good line, but something about my expression or tone had convinced her I was okay, and she nodded and sat beside me.

I found out later that she'd been just about to leave, since all her friends had left already. But she stayed with me, sitting quietly most of the time, until closing, and we'd gone out for breakfast at Denny's. Not much conversation, just quiet little smiles shared between us.

I guess we could both see in the other's eyes the tired human condition. Both of us had a little world-weariness about us, from failed relationships and other endeavors. She was a recent college dropout, and I'm just a general laborer, wandering from job to job, avoiding the responsibility that my intelligence laid on me. We got along.

In fact, we'd had several adventures since then, driving cross-country more than once, putting my car to the test. The last few

days, though, we'd both begun to feel premonitions. Something was about to happen, and we didn't know what. Either we were about to go our separate ways, or the next step in our relationship was just around the corner.

Kelli reacted to this premonition by drinking a little more than usual, and flirting a lot more than usual. I reacted by keeping to myself and throwing her dark looks.

Now, I realized that it had just been a phase. I wanted Kelli, and I didn't really care if she'd been a bad girl for just one night. I just wanted to feel her warmth against me again, and gaze into her soft brown eyes across early morning's pillow.

"Where did you go?" I called out to the fog.

"I'm right here." It was Allen's voice, and I felt his heavy hand on my shoulder.

I jerked in surprise. "Jesus Christ!" I blurted out before I could think.

"Just me — Allen," Allen said, smiling. "You must be more drunk than I thought, Mike. Come on back to the truck before you get lost out here."

His arm around my shoulder began to guide me back toward the lights.

"But, Kelli's ..." I started.

"I know, Mike," he said kindly. "I know. They're trying to contact her family right now."

"What?" I stopped walking. "Contact her family?"

"That's what they do, for things like this," he said.

"Things like ..."

"Come on, Mike," he said. "Quit babbling. Just be quiet until I get you in the truck, or they'll arrest you for being drunk in public. I'll take you home and we'll get some coffee, okay?"

He led me up to the passenger door of his truck, and opened it, nudging me with one hand to get in. I got in, and he shut the door behind me.

What was he talking about? Contact her family?

Then I saw the stretcher with the sheet over it. The lump under the sheet was about five feet long, quite thin.

I heard the officer's voice seeping through the fog. "She was a cute little thing, wasn't she?"

Another officer responded, "Poor girl never had a chance."

Allen turned his key in the ignition, and we drove away in silence.

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