



## EVERY BREATH YOU TAKE

by

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The Walkman was out of batteries. He found a 7-Eleven and bought a cherry Slurpee after boosting a pack of Ray-O-Vac's. The checkout girl couldn't be more than twenty, college girl. Her shirt read *Damonville*. It was just the two of them in the store.

"That gonna be all?" she asked, standard line to make sure customers weren't shoplifting. He smiled, nodded his head, and reached into his jeans for some of the cash he took off the Hispanic girl earlier in the day.

The clerk's name tag read *Steffie*. "What time you get off, Steffie?"

His voice sounded like that 3 a.m. phone sex tone he used to swill back in the days of actually holding a job and living in an apartment with a girlfriend who'd be sleeping when he surfed Yahoo Chat for lonely BBW's. The girl, her blonde hair tied back but her nose ring in, laughed and said her boyfriend would be picking her up. He liked the way she blushed as she counted his change; it was the little things that kept some of them *alive*.

"Have a good one, darlin'," said Steffie, winking and popping her gum at him.

Out on the street, he powered up the Walkman and continued his tape. It was a 90-minute Memorex with *Every Breath You Take* looped continuously. Even a serial killer needs a soundtrack, he thought—and liked the idea of just one song, a signature, sort of like how Einstein wore the same clothes every day so he didn't have to waste brain energy thinking about his choice.

It was a late June afternoon. The Greyhound bus terminal off Market Street was a turnstile of human slop and garbage going to Kansas City and points unknown. The Slurpee tasted good, like ice cream when you're a kid and that sandpaper wall inside your throat won't quit hurting. That's why he liked the music, too. It drowned out the memories when they came to the surface, like the girl in Savannah that just wouldn't sink in that pond outside McGrory Park. Back then the only thing to do was to fish her out, hack her up, and leave the pieces stretched out in the shape of a peace sign in a field off Highway 201. Some local television station fed the story to a national network, and then they started calling him the Peace Sign Killer. He hated the name.

His feet hurt. The tennis shoes he'd bought at Payless back in Detroit were worn, dull gray and faded red and houses to his holy corns. He started to really notice how much they were hurting when he stomped that runaway crack whore's head in after an argument about whose turn it was to hit the pipe. When her skull split, it was the sound of a childhood's worth of Christmas walnuts cracking at the same time. She had a mole in the shape of a shamrock on her right breast. Her navel smelled of patchouli and old sex.

There was a small park across from the 7-Eleven. A sign outside its entrance read *Chatsworth Conservatory*. He walked fifty paces inside, bowed to an elm tree, and took a piss across its mottled bark. Somewhere a raven cawed twice. He found a bench near a stand of

yellow roses where someone left a copy of *Catcher in the Rye*—across its cover was scrawled the epitaph “*Holden died for oil.*” The bookmark inside, a receipt from Victoria’s Secret for three pairs of panties and one bra, was dated two days ago. He wondered if they were thongs as he stretched out his tall frame onto the bench, using Salinger’s trash as a pillow.

He dreamed of being the tallest jockey to win the Kentucky Derby. He never dreamed of sex or killing them. He did at first; after the fourth time his dreams vanished. At first he was afraid he was going insane but they returned, in color and just like new. It was then he started to sleep better and kill once a month. In a few days it will be a year. That’s the last one, he told himself each time he got to close his eyes—*time to retire.*

Leaving behind the world of cappuccino and Rogaine was easy enough. Breaking up with the girlfriend was as simple as mocking her Oprah Book Club choices at a family dinner and leaving matchbooks from the swing club Tartar’s in his pockets to be discovered on laundry day. He liquidated his 401-k, sold the Lexus, and went on the road.

At first it was Kerouac for beginners—not knowing the ropes, the terrain. He found out soon enough there was an entire subculture traveling across the country in search of disappearing, fleeing, evading, *hunting*. He didn’t need credit anymore or the trails it left. Cash was king. One hobo in Sausalito fucked with him once, trying to jack his wad and he eviscerated the clown behind a Burger King after hours while his hobo dog watched.

He stopped reading the papers; no one had his description right anymore. One paper called him a Latino male with a cleft jaw. It was getting ridiculous. Little by little his dreams pushed away the hunger for another. This night’s dream was about his birthday—and how he wanted nothing more than to get a kiss from Stephanie Korzon up the block on Church Street. Ten years old and she was his best friend. She held his hand once while they walked down

Sunset Boulevard after school. When he went to find her after the family had given him his cake and presents, he discovered her behind the gazebo in Williamsburg Park with Kenny Auld, son of the town's police chief. They weren't holding hands.

He woke, startled. Night had wrapped a bag around the Conservatory grounds. A figure stood over him.

"You shouldn't sleep here at night." It was a female voice, the area around her silhouette washed in a bright yellow fluorescent light spraying out from a nearby pole. He looked up, wiping a touch of drool from the corner of his mouth. It was Steffie. "I pass through here on my way home from work each night," she explained to him.

He sat up. "Thought your boyfriend was picking you up."

She smiled. "He is," she said, her voice sounding tired after work. "You are *so* late." When he moved, she saw the copy of the book. "Shit!" she cried out, punching him in his shoulder. "I *knew* I left this somewhere."

They went to eat at White Castle. He slipped his last onion ring onto her finger after they were done eating and proposed.

"I'll never leave the toilet seat up," he swore, "and you won't have to fight me for the remote."

"Promises, promises," Steffie teased. She picked up the tab. He liked that even more. Something from long ago lit a flame in the darkness, like a single candle on a cupcake. She reached out and picked up the headphones to his Walkman, wrapping them over her loose blonde ringlets of hair. Steffie punched the button, closing her eyes and swaying her freckled face to the music punching her eardrums. "*Every breath you take, every move you make...*" she began to sing, oblivious to the other patrons eyeing her performance.

She wore the onion ring out of White Castle and into the parking lot.

“I should be drifting,” he said, measuring her fight with his blue eyes.

One of her hands reached out and brushed the open patch of skin around his collar. “No tags.” She leaned in and gave him an actual sniff. He had showered inside a YMCA after killing the girl earlier. “Earthy,” she remarked. She smelled of White Diamonds. Steffie took a step back, admiring him. “I don’t usually go for strays. You like leftovers?” she asked.

“Love them,” he confessed, thinking about the girl from Bowling Green. She unlocked the passenger door to her Hyundai and held it open for him. He reached over and undid her lock. As she slid in and revved the engine, he noticed the chain hanging from her rearview mirror. A solid brass peace sign dangled in the air. “You a hippie chick?” he asked as she backed out of the White Castle parking lot, spinning her tires on the road as they pulled away.

“Tell you on the honeymoon,” Steffie promised.