

# SO FAR AWAY

BY DAVID PASCAL

Levine had been trying to get the classical station on the car radio when he hit the thing head-on.

He was doing eighty-three miles an hour, coming down the 490 Expressway at 2 AM from a late-night marketing session at Dixon Schwabl. He had been thinking about the problems with his client, and about the problems with his marriage, and about the weight he was gaining, and about the hair he was losing, and about the bills that wouldn't stop mounting up, and about how maybe some Vivaldi on WXXI would keep his blood pressure down.

He had been thinking about everything but the road. A flash of movement in the headlights snapped his eyes from the radio. A brightly lit figure suddenly there out of nowhere. His heart nearly leapt out of his throat.

*Shit!* He felt the thud in his belly more than he heard it. The clean line of his BMW's hood crumpled back like aluminum foil and warped toward the windshield. Denim and a flash of a sleeve, red and checkered, flickered across his field of vision like a subliminal message in a film. As though hit by a sledgehammer, his windshield transformed into a splintering spray of branching white cracks. Whatever, whoever, it had been was already flying behind him, rolling and flapping across the concrete and into the dark.

Levine stood on the brake. The car protested, its rear half swerving hard right.

*Jesus! I—I killed somebody!*

He twisted the wheel to keep from spinning out and losing control of the car. The brakes and wheels made high, ripping sounds, like amplified chalk on a blackboard. The steering wheel bucked and shuddered in his hands.

Levine stole a glance in the rear view mirror as he fought to stop the car. The scarecrow shape had flopped to a halt on the concrete that stretched ever further behind.

The BMW's brakes ground as he struggled to control the now-rocking car. With a gut-deep snap, the car straightened. Clouds

of white steam hissed from the hood. Levine smelled the tart warmth of spilled antifreeze. Something under the hood muttered and huffed erratically as the car's smashed muzzle cast cones of light through the steam in novel directions. The headlight eyes now pointed in different directions, like the eyes of a startled lizard.

The engine was still on despite the damage. Levine pressed the gas. *Run*. The body on the ground was behind him, getting farther behind with every moment. *Run*. He felt the word in his gut. *It's late, nobody saw me. I could—*

His jaw tightened. No. He eased back on the gas. These days, every inch of expressway was covered by digital cameras on monitoring poles. Hell, there were satellites in space now watching cities and putting footage on the net twenty-four hours a day. Everything was recorded now. Somewhere, a lens had seen it. Recorded it. His plate numbers were probably already being used to call up his personal data.

Levine felt trapped. Then angry. Then ashamed. Dear God—he'd *hit* someone. *Idiot. Stupid*. He hadn't been looking. It was all his fault. His responsibility. He placed a shaking hand on his forehead.

He stepped on the brakes. The car, as though wearied, stopped more easily now. Levine tried his flashers. They still worked. The clock on the dash glowed 2:12 AM. There were no other cars in sight. He looped around and headed back on the expressway, to the spot where it occurred.

He slowed the car. The headlights more or less lit long smears of blood on the concrete. The colors shifted with a weird magic in the skewed beams, the low, metal-grey grin of the moon, the flickering, sterile gleam of the fluorescent streetlights swelling like antennae above the overpass.

Levine followed the main streak of blood until it ended in a body lying by the shoulder of the road. He pulled over to it, slanting shadows growing behind the figure in weird angles from the misaligned headlights. Levine stopped the car, opened his door, and stepped out.

The body lay on its side, half off the road. The back was to him. Among discarded M&M wrappers and a McDonald's take-out

bag, it lay casting double shadows in the nearby patches of dried brown grass and gravel.

There was an empty Coke bottle by the victim's shoes. The legs were thin and small in old blue jeans. The sneakers were cheap. The red checked shirt was dirty and had been pulled half off. A white T-shirt beneath was also dirty.

Levine saw long, platinum blond hair streaming from under a baseball cap. A girl.

*My God. I hit a kid.*

Astonished, dream-like with grief, Levine walked toward the body as though he were a fish floating upward toward light. He stood over the body in the dark. The visibly twisted back twitched. A slim leg shuddered.

In the distance Levine could hear a siren that he didn't want to hear. He put his hand over his mouth and then he took it away and he bent down and put out his hand and touched the body gently. It shifted and turned to him.

A sound like a gnarl of piccolos slipped up into the night.

Levine bleated and jerked backwards, stumbling and falling back onto his side. He pushed still further away, raggedly, like a startled crab, and stared wide-eyed at the figure bleeding in the gravel, the approaching siren forgotten. Levine was still staring when a Rochester Police car pulled up, cut the siren, and came to a stop behind his own.

The twirling red and white emergency lights on the police car roof added even crazier shadows to those cast by the BMW's lights. Then the directional strobes on the back of the cruiser flashed into life, brightly reflected from every sign within a mile.

An electric click and hum came from the front of the police car. Levine heard a bored voice say, "Please keep your hands where I can see them at all times." The cruiser's PA system clicked off, a door opened, and footsteps approached.

Levine looked up. The officer was black and wore round, gold, wire-rim glasses. He looked like he needed sleep. A beer belly like a blue sack hung over the police belt. The officer had one hand on the butt of his holstered pistol; the other held a flashlight.

“That’s not ... that ... what the *hell?*” said Levine.

The officer looked at the bloody figure in the red checked shirt. He approached it, clicked his flashlight on, and bent forward to look at it.

His upper lip curled.

“Ahh, shit,” mumbled the officer. “Every fuckin’ time I get night duty ...”

“What—?”

“You got your driver’s license and registration? Sir,” added the officer with reluctance, noting Levine’s tailored suit and Italian silk tie. “Need your driver’s license and registration. Sir.”

The discordant notes slithered into the air again, more wails, now, than music.

“I—yeah, sure. Sure.”

Levine stood up, patted his suit, and took out his wallet. He handed the whole wallet to the officer.

“Just need the driver’s license and registration. Sir.”

“Right. Right.”

Levine fumbled with the wallet and then handed the officer his license and registration.

The officer went back to his car and took out a slim, metal rectangle secured to the dashboard by a wire. He started reading Levine’s stats into it.

Levine watched for a moment, figuring the rectangle was some kind of microphone. Then his head turned, again. Toward the thing he had hit.

He’d never seen one of them in person, before, if that was even the right phrase. He’d seen them on TV for years, of course. He knew about the settlements the Feds had set up out past Mendon and Macedon. But he’d never been up close, never so close. It looked almost like a homeless person lying there, with the broken shoes, the old jeans, the cheap shirt, the cap. The thin high chest rose up and down like a quiet wave on the surface of a lake, and the blood—yes, it *was* purple, just like the news reports said. In the light of the moon, it looked almost red. Almost human.

A blue-skinned, three-fingered hand with strange joints reached out and, trembling, clawed the air. The wailing modulated into something almost like wind, almost like sobs. Levine ran his

hand through his thinning hair. He stood there a moment. He shrugged off his coat and went to put it over the thing.

“Stand *away* from it, sir!” yelled the officer.

Levine looked down into huge shining black eyes, a delicate blue face framed by a wild splash of long, eerily lovely, white hair. The ends of the hair danced in the unsynchronized sighing of the thing’s two tiny mouths. A spasm shook it. The snapped arms and twisted legs in their half-swastika pattern shifted. Levine saw blood, if it was blood, rapidly staining the shabby pants and shirt with sickening chrysanthemum blooms.

It saw him. It did see him. Levine was sure it saw him. Levine stood over it, holding his coat. How could it not see him?

“It’s cold,” he said, half to the officer, half to himself. “It’s cold, Officer.”

“Stay. Fucking. Away from it. Sir.”

Levine still looked at the creature, but stepped back, holding the coat in his hands in a half-hug, like a child with a teddy bear.

Two more minutes went by. Levine heard the police officer speak into his car phone. Then the cop reached into his car and pulled out a set of beige latex medical gloves. He pulled them on as he walked over to the creature. Crouching, he touched it where its bones looked broken.

The officer tried moving its limbs. The piccolo shrieks rose like some distorted avant-garde electronica, then seemed to lose all strength. Shrills of pain and sobs of breathing melded into each other and grew indistinguishable. The slim legs twitched again.

The officer directed his flashlight into its gleaming ebony eyes for a few moments: on-off, on-off. Then he flicked the light definitively off. He stood up. A big melancholy grunt cut free from the depths of his thick blue belly. He flicked open the strap of his holster, closed his hand over the gun butt, and pulled out the gun.

“What are you doing?” said Levine.

“Puttin’ Ugly out of her misery.”

“What? You’re going to *shoot* it? You’re not going to call a hospital? You can’t, you, look, this is a, a *living thing!* You can’t—”

“Look, mister,” said the officer. “You know how many millions of these fucking things we got around the state nowadays? We got ’em coming out our goddam ass. We got to feed ’em. We

got to put clothes on 'em. We got an economy that's in the toilet, and we're spending money that we ain't even got to take care of these stupid—whatever the hell they are. Least the dumbass things can do is obey the law and stay where they supposed to. But, no—every damn week a couple of them got to hop the wires and play in traffic. This bitch here ain't got the sense to stay where she been put? That is too fucking bad.”

“You can't just *kill* someone. You can't just shoot someone in the street. They didn't come here because they wanted to. They had no choice.”

“Yeah, yeah. The fucking Germans and Chinese breed 'em in tanks, and the fucking corporations buy 'em and ship 'em in for shit work here. All right. Fine. They're here, we can't send 'em back, no refunds. What can we do? They here to stay. But they *supposed* to stay where we *tell* them to stay. That's why the Federal Government got Quarantine Areas set up. There, the Federal Government can deal with 'em. There they got jurisdiction. They got rules. Outside? These things ain't got shit. Bitch runs off and wanders into traffic, it's her hard luck.”

“I can't believe this. I cannot believe this. You're going to—you're going to just commit *murder* and walk off? Look, it ... it needs to go to a hospital!”

The officer pressed his lips together and mumbled something under his breath.

“Look. Stupid.” The officer pointed with his pistol to the creature on the ground, whose legs were beginning to tremble more and more weakly. “How fast was you going when you smacked her? Seventy, seventy-five? *Look* at what you done. This bitch, she all busted up. She busted all to pieces. She ain't going to make it to no hospital. Even if she did, we ain't got doctors be any good patching up guts like those. It's Saturday night. The hospitals got drunks and drug addicts and gang members coming in. They ain't going to put humans on hold just to fiddle around with this thing. We ain't got enough money to let them take care of things from God knows where. Hell, we ain't got enough to take care of people from here.”

The creature's labored breathing, its nearly musical whimpering, devolved into yips and hoarse spittle. Bubbles of purplish blood formed at the edges of the tiny, delicate mouths.

“Bitch should have stayed on the reservation. Just like you should have watched where you were going. But she did not. And you did not, either. And now I got a choice. I can let her suffer and bleed a real good long time before she dies. Or I can put her to sleep here and now. Quick, easy, peaceful. What I say? Put her to sleep. Quick. Easy.”

“But she's—they're intelligent. They're aware. You can't just, you can't just kill a person when there's medical care available. There's such a thing as basic human rights.”

“Mister, you just do not get it, do you? She ain't a person. None of them are persons. None of them are human. If you ain't human, you ain't got no human rights. You understand, now?”

Levine was silent.

The police officer looked at Levine. The cop closed his eyes and adjusted the gold, wire-rim glasses. He shrugged.

“Hey, man. I ain't got to do her. I was just trying to be nice. You rather see her just lie there in a ditch all night, bleed to death? OK by me.”

The cop returned his gun to its holster and went back to his vehicle. He reached in, got Levine's identification, and walked back.

“Here,” said the cop, proffering Levine's things. “Call your insurance people in the morning.”

Levine took back his license and his papers. The officer turned to go. Faint, flute-like mewlings whispered into the evening air.

“Are you at least going to *call the hospital?*” said Levine. “Can you at least do *that?*”

The policeman stopped without turning around.

“I called them soon as I pulled up,” he said. “Sir.”

His dark black eyes looked up at the starry sky.

“Busy night. Like every Saturday. Got their hands full. They figure they be able to send an ambulance over for her by morning. Four, five hours. Not that it'll make any difference.”

He turned his head and his eyes rested on the trembling three-fingered hands.

“Four, five more hours ...” He shook his head.

The officer looked at Levine. Then he turned to go.

“Officer?”

“Yeah?”

“Why did you call it ‘her?’”

“The hair,” he said. “The females got real light grey hair. Close to white. The menfolk got dark gray hair.”

“Really.”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Well now you do.”

Levine looked at the twisted limbs. One heel kicked softly in a small pool of blood, then jerked again. The empty Coke bottle rolled away. There was a sound of glass against gravel.

“It ... it just seems ... wrong. They came here ... they came here to help us,” Levine said, and he looked at the policeman. “They came here from so far away.”

The policeman opened his car door.

“We all got to die someplace. Sir.”

The officer shut the car door and drove away.

Levine watched the police car turn onto the road and drive away. He watched until it was gone, then looked over at the creature. Now she was coughing up the purplish blood, and beginning to choke on it. She looked ... terrified.

Levine walked over to her. He looked down. The frightened eyes. The wild white hair. He turned and went to his car and sat sat in the front seat. He covered his face with his hands. After a few minutes, he lowered his hands and stepped out of the car. He went to the creature and picked up the empty Coke bottle. He stood over the figure and raised his arm, and smashed the bottle into its head, several times.