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AT KNIFE POINT KEVIN KANE

I'm heading over to my friend's house with a plastic grocery bag weighted down by a fresh-baked loaf of carrot bread. It's about quarter to midnight, two days before Thanksgiving. I didn't want to wear my big coat because it's so awkward, but I'm regretting that decision as I shiver against the cold. A thin man rides a bike that looks like it weighs a hundred pounds across the road and calls out to me, "hey man, you got a light?" He's almost more of a silhouette, it's so dark out.

"No," I say, "I don't smoke. I don't have a match or anything." I even pat my pockets for emphasis. He rides up a driveway in front of me and onto the sidewalk. It's an ancient bike and it squeaks in a rhee-rhee fashion when he pedals it.

He rides toward me and, when his head is close, says, "You okay man." His entire focus is on me and he moves awkwardly on the bike.

I can't tell if it's a question or not, but I say, "yeah." He keeps going down the sidewalk away from me.

My cell phone rings and Andy's old number comes up on the caller ID. I flip the cover down. "I didn't think you were back yet," I say. "I just called your house in Baltimore and then your girlfriend's."

"I just got back. Was she home?"

"No."

“What are you doing right now?” He asks.

“Well, I’m heading over to this girl’s house and taking her a loaf of carrot bread to try and get her number.”

Just within the corner of my vision, something flits like the wing of a bird and I move quickly to the right. The man on the bike rides up, “It’s cool,” he says. His voice rides easy like expensive vodka. From his tone, it seems we’re acquaintances now. He lets me catch up. “Yo, you smoke weed?” he asks, pedaling slowly next to me. His black skin and leather jacket melt together in the shadows. He becomes a sort of specter resembling all the bums coming around asking for something or selling something. I have always tried to move quickly past them as if they really were ghosts, ignoring their pleas and questions.

But today, I say, “no, I don’t smoke.”

I hear on the phone, “Who’s that?”

“This guy next to me on the sidewalk,” I say as the man stops. I turn with the phone on my ear as he lays his bike down.

“Hold up,” he says. I do. He moves toward me, more like floating than walking, and reaches into his jacket. His pants are black: dark like the place we’re standing where the tree blocks the streetlight, where the sidewalk cracks among dried leaves. No cars are passing by, although it’s a busy road, Main Street, heading out of downtown. There’s not even a sliver of moon in the sky. He’s reaching into his jacket maybe for the weed he mentioned. I stand there waiting. His hand closes over something unseen and he begins to draw out a long knife. It’s not a curved, French kitchen knife or a jagged hunting knife used to split the bellies of deer. It’s a killing knife: a stabbing, mugging blade, shiny. It’s the only bright spot around us. The blade glitters and it seems enormous, growing larger as more of it comes into view. Suddenly, the world turns beneath me and becomes the place I never knew it was.

He looks at me, at whatever registers on my face, and says, “Let’s make this easy. Don’t run.” The voice is still the same conversational tone, like he’s still selling me something, but without any hint of humor. It’s the most serious thing I’ve ever heard. The cold air outside disappears. It must be his voice and his words that trigger it that fast. I’m flying. My legs carry me without a thought into the three lane one-way road and the corner of my eye watches him, or maybe I just feel him, take off after me. But I fly. My wild leap into the road makes the plastic grocery bag feel lighter and I realize I’ve lost my carrot bread. Adrenalin thumping my blood loudly, I run faster than I can remember ever having done before. It isn’t like I’ve read about. The world and moment don’t freeze, or at least not where I am. The present simply becomes the only thing necessary. The rest of the world falls away.

I hear Andy’s voice, “What’s going on?” as I reach the south sidewalk. And I realize I’m still dutifully keeping the phone glued to my ear. I ran across the road with it up there

the whole time. “The guy tried to jump me,” I say. But I’m breathless and lower the phone to run full out, arms pumping. I don’t know how the bread could have fallen out, and I drop my bag. It drifts to the pavement behind me. I run a block but, as I glance back, he’s gone. My small black book falls from my inside jacket pocket and I risk stopping to scoop it up. I raise the phone, “Yeah, that guy just pulled a knife on me,” I tell Andy. And I lower the phone again and race toward my friend’s house, back across the empty road. I see a few cars driving out of the city. They look far away and their headlights look dim.

The house is down a little dead-end side street. I come up on the porch. “Man, I lost my bread, oh my god, I can’t believe that just happened to me, I’m here now at that girl’s house,” I spray the words into the phone. The dog in the house, Otto, starts to bark in loud bursts. Nothing comes down the street behind me. While knocking on the door, I ask Andy if I can call him back and he says he’s going for a walk. A form comes to the door. I recognize Liam as he opens the fogged-glass door. I launch into my story before I realize that he doesn’t even really know me. We had met at a party, here, last week; the same time I met the girl I was bringing carrot bread for. He looks at me like a guy who knows my secrets, but won’t do anything with them as if he lacks any sort of malice or cruelty. I haven’t a clue what he could know. Empty of the crowds of people and cigarette smoke from last week, the house feels naked.

Safe in the quiet house, my story suddenly doesn’t sound believable. “It doesn’t feel real,” I say, “whatever that means.” Liam offers to take me home. On our way out, he grabs a flannel jacket and I see a copy of one of Guy Debord’s books. The name triggers something. “My friend Andy told me about him once,” I say. “An art movement in France, I think the fifties, right?”

“1957,” Liam tells me. “They were called Situationist International.” He drives me home in his silver Jetta and I offer to take him up on his selling it before I remember that I’m broke. I have two dollars in my wallet. It occurs to me that I ran from that man for two dollars, maybe my phone, and my bread.

On the ride back, only four or five blocks, “yeah,” I say, “right up here on Main, see there’s my bread.”

“But that’s newspaper,” Liam says, “see.” He points to it on the right as he slows down, the wind catches it from underneath, spills it against the curb. The tiny black writing looks to me like insects crawling over used butcher paper. I didn’t notice the newspaper earlier. I begin to wonder if the man picked up my bread. I picture him using that huge knife to carve out chunks of moist, sweet bread to carry them to his mouth.