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(Co-edited with Dede Crane)

Caught Lisa Moore



ANANSI

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For Steve

The Break

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Searchlight

Slaney broke out of the woods and skidded down a soft embankment to the side of the road. There was nothing but forest on both sides of the asphalt as far as he could see. He thought it might be three in the morning and he was about two miles from the prison. It had taken an hour to get through the woods.

He had crawled under the chain-link fence around the yard and through the long grass on the other side. He had run hunched over and he'd crawled on his elbows and knees, pulling himself across the ground, and he'd stayed still, with his face in the earth, while the searchlight arced over him. At the end of the field was a steep hill of loose shale and the rocks had clattered away from his shoes.

The soles of Slaney's shoes were tan-coloured and slippery. The tan had worn off and a smooth patch of black rubber showed on the bottom of each shoe. He'd imagined the soles lit up as the searchlight hit them. He had on the orange coveralls. They had always been orange, but when everybody was wearing them they were less orange.

For an instant the perfect oval of hard light had contained him like the shell of an egg and then he'd gone animal numb and cringing, a counterintuitive move, the prison psychotherapist might have said, if they were back in her office discussing the break — she talked slips and displacement, sublimation and counter-intuition, and allowed for an inner mechanism he could not see or touch but had to account for — then the oval slid him back into darkness and he charged up the hill again.

Near the top, the shale had given way to a curve of reddish topsoil with an overhang of ragged grass and shrub. There was a cracked yellow beef bucket and a ringer washer turned on its side, a bald white.

Slaney had grabbed at a tangled clot of branches but it came loose in his hand. Then he'd dug the toe of his shoe in deep and hefted his chest over the prickly grass overhang and rolled on top of it.

He lay there, flat on his back, chest hammering, looking at the stars. It was as far as he had been from the Springhill penitentiary since the doors of that institution admitted him four years before. It was not far enough.

He'd heaved himself off the ground and started running.

This was Nova Scotia and it was June 14, 1978. Slaney would be twenty-five years old the next day.

The night of his escape would come back to him, moments of lit intensity, for the rest of his life. He saw himself on that hill in the brilliant spot of the swinging searchlight, the orange of his back as it might have appeared to the guards in the watchtower, had they glanced that way.

The Long Night

Slaney stood on the highway and the stillness of the moonlit night settled over him. The evening thumped down and then Slaney ran for all he was worth because it seemed foolhardy to stand still.

Then it seemed foolhardy not to be still.

He felt he had to be still in order to listen. He was listening with all his might. He knew the squad cars were coming and there would be dogs. He accepted that there was nothing he could do now but wait.

A fellow prisoner named Harold had arranged a place for him. It was a room over a bar, several hours from the penitentiary, if Slaney happened to get that far.

Harold said that the bar belonged to his grandmother. They had a horsehair dance floor and served the best fish and chips in Nova Scotia. They had rock bands passing through and strippers once a week and they sponsored a school basketball team.

Harold's place was in Guysborough. The cops would be expecting Slaney to be going west. But Slaney was lighting out in the opposite direction. A trucker would be heading for the ferry in North Sydney, bringing a shipment of Lay's potato chips to Newfoundland.

Slaney could get a ride with him as far as Harold's place in Guysborough, then backtrack the next day when things had cooled down a little.

He bent over on the side of the highway with his hands on his knees and caught his breath. He whispered to himself. He spoke a stream of profanity and he said a prayer to the Virgin Mary, in whom he half believed. Mosquitoes touched him all

over. They settled on his skin and put their fine things into him and they were lulled and bloated and thought themselves sexy and near death.

They got in his mouth and he spit and they dotted his saliva. They were in the crease of his left eyelid. He wiped one out of his eye and found he was weeping. He was snot-smearred and tears dropped off his eyelashes. He could hear the whine of just one mosquito above the rest.

It was tears or sweat, he didn't know.

He'd broken out of prison and he was going back to Colombia. He'd learned from the first trip down there, the trip that had landed him in jail, that the most serious mistakes are the easiest to make. There are mistakes that stand in the centre of an empty field and cry out for love.

The largest mistake, that time, was that Slaney and Hearn had underestimated the Newfoundland fishermen of Capelin Cove. The fishermen had known about the caves the boys had dug for stashing the weed. They'd seen the guys with their long hair and shovels and picks drive in from town and set up tents in an empty field. They'd watched them down at the beach all day, heard them at night with their guitars around the bonfire. The fishermen had called the cops.

Slaney and the boys had mistaken the fishermen's idle calculation for a blind eye and they had been turned in.

And they'd mistaken the fog for cover but it was an unveiling. Slaney and Hearn had lost their bearings in a dense fog, after sailing home from Colombia. They were just a half-mile off shore with two tons of marijuana on board and they'd required assistance.

There were mistakes and there was a dearth of luck when they had needed just a little. A little luck would have seen

them through the first trip despite their dumb moves.

Now Slaney was out again and he knew the nature of mistakes. They were detectable but you had to read all the signs backwards or inside out. Those first mistakes had cost him. They meant he could never go home. He'd never see Newfoundland again.

Everything will happen from here, he thought. This time they would do it right. He could feel luck like an animal presence, feral and watchful. He would have to coax it into the open. Grab it by the throat.

Slaney had broken out of prison and beat his way through the forest. He'd stumbled into a ditch of lupins. The searchlight must have seeped into his skin back there, just outside the prison fence, a radioactive buzz that left him with something extra. He wasn't himself; he was himself with something added.

Or the light had bleached away everything he was except the need not to be attacked by police dogs.

There was the scent of the lupins as he bashed through, the wet stalks grabbing at his shins. Cold raindrops scattering from the leaves. Then he was up on the shoulder of the road. He batted his hands around his head, girly swings at the swarms of mosquitoes.

The prayers he said between gusts of filthy language were polite and he had honed down his petition to a single word: the word was *please*. He had an idea about the Virgin Mary in ordinary clothes, jeans and a T-shirt. She was complicated but placid, more human than divine. He did not think *virgin*, he thought ordinary and smart. A girl with a blade of grass between her thumbs that she blew on to make a trilling noise. He called out for her now.

His prayers were meant to stave off the dread he felt and a shame that had nothing to do with the crime he'd committed or the fact that he was standing on the side of the road, under the moon, covered in mud, at the mercy of an ex-convict with a transport truck.

It was a rootless and fickle shame. It might have been someone else's shame, a storm touching down, or a shame belonging to no one, knocking against everything in its path.

His curses were an incantation against too much humility and the prayers pleaded with the Virgin to make the mosquitoes go away.

Then the earth revved and thrummed. He jumped back into the ditch. He lay down flat with the lupins trembling over him. The sirens were loud, even at a distance, baritone whoops that scaled up to clear metallic bleats. The hoops of hollow, tin-bright noise overlapped and the torrent of squeal echoed off the hills. Slaney counted five cars. There were five of them.

Red and blue bands of light sliced through the lupin stalks and the heads of the flowers tipped and swung in the backdraft as the cars roared past. The siren of each car was so shrill that it pierced the bones of his skull, and the tiny hammer in his ear banged out a message of calibrated terror and the rocks his cheek rested on in the ditch were full of vibration and then the sirens, one at a time, receded, and the echoes dissipated and silence followed.

It was not silence. Slaney mistook it for silence but there was a wind that had come a long distance and it jostled every tree. Some branches rubbed against one another, squeaking. The leaves of the lupins chussed like the turning pages of a glossy magazine.

Five cars. They would go another three or four miles and

then they'd let the dogs out. They had taken this long because they'd had to gather up the dogs. Slaney listened for the barking, which would be carried on the wind.

He crawled out of the ditch to meet the next vehicle and he stood straight and brushed his hands over his chest and tugged the collar of the coveralls. He couldn't wait for the truck that had been arranged. Anything could have happened to that truck.

He was getting the hell out of there before the dogs showed up.

A station wagon went by with one headlight and he could see in the pale yellow shaft that it had begun to rain. The station wagon had a mattress tied to the roof. It had slowed to a crawl. There was a woman smoking a cigarette in the passenger seat. She turned all the way around to get a good look at him as they rolled to a stop.

Slaney would remember her face for a long time. An amber dashlight lit her brown hair. The reflection of his own face slid over hers on the window and stopped when the car stopped, so that for the briefest instant the two faces became one grotesque face with two noses and four eyes, and there was an elongated forehead and a stretched mannish chin under her full mouth and maybe she saw the same thing on her side of the glass.

The cop cars must have passed her already and she would have known that they were looking for someone. She exhaled the smoke and he saw it waggle up lazily. She reached over and touched the lock on the passenger door with a finger. They paused there, looking at him, though Slaney could not see the driver of the car, and then they sped up with a spray of gravel hitting his thighs.

Slaney had become aware of how small he was in relation

to the highway and to the hills of trees and the sky. He felt the unspooling of time.

Time had been pulled up tight as if with a winch and somebody had flicked a switch and it was unspooling with blurry speed. He expected it to snag. If it snagged, it would not un snag.

Four years and two days. Time moved evenly in prison without ever hurrying or slowing down. It was jellied and unthinking. He had timed the break so he could be out of prison for his birthday.

Slaney's sister had visited him in prison over the last year, and they'd spoken about the break, using general terms and a kind of code they made up as they went along.

She'd let him know that Hearn was planning a new trip and was expecting him. His sister was in contact with Hearn. And she was the one who told him the transport truck would pick him up on the side of the road.

The gist of it was that there would be a ride for him at the appointed time. Most escaped prisoners get caught on the first night out. Slaney had to get himself through the first night, and then he'd head west, across the country, to Vancouver, where he'd meet up with Hearn. He was heading back to Colombia from there and he would return with enough pot to make them both millionaires.

Easy Rider

There were two pinpoints of light in the distance that dipped down and disappeared and bobbed back up. Slaney prayed to the Virgin that these were the lights of the transport truck with

the driver who had turned his life around and had accepted Jesus into his heart, and had attended Alcoholics Anonymous, believing in the twelve-step program and the ancient, sinister advice of one day at a time.

This trucker had, according to Slaney's sister, gone to work in a diner on Duckworth Street where ex-cons were welcome because the owner was also an ex-con, and he'd met a nurse there and they'd married and had a child and bought a new house on the mainland.

Slaney's sister had put in a call and the trucker said he would be passing through and he would pick up Slaney if he saw him and drop him at Harold's.

The lupins on the side of the road were spilling forward, rushing through the ditch in the reaching headlights as if a dam had broken. Spilling all the way down the sides of the vast dark highway in a lit-up river of sloshing purple, trying to outrace the reach of the pummelling lights. Then the transport truck was upon him, deafening; the long silver flank dirty and close enough that Slaney could have touched it. Behind the truck the lupins tumbled back into darkness, unspilling, snuffed out.

The truck had passed him and Slaney was covered in a film of wet grit. The exhaust smelled sharp in the ozone-laden air. He wiped his face with his sleeve. Slaney knew the minute he had seen the headlights in the distance that if it didn't stop he would be caught. Two possible lives formed and unformed and one of them had to do with the truck stopping and the other had to do with being caught within the next hour.

There would be the walk back down the corridor to his cell. He could summon the image of a crack in the concrete floor near his cot, or it came to him unbidden. This was a

sign that the prison had got inside him. When he opened his eyes he saw the red tail lights of the truck stopped a ways down the road.

He ran hard; he was afraid the driver would change his mind and take off. Slaney opened the door of the truck and climbed up into the cab. The vibration of the idling engine passed through the seat under Slaney into his thighs and ass and shoulder blades. There was a Virgin Mary statuette on the dash. She was ivory-coloured, her arms were held out, tiny palms upward. Her pale longish face tipped down, eyes closed.

The driver put the truck into gear and he waited, his face set toward the side mirror. He just sat there, looking behind them as if he had all the time in the world. Finally, a yellow convertible flared past them and was gone.

Thank you for stopping, Slaney said. The driver reached up to the ceiling and touched a light that snapped on and he looked Slaney over. A few mosquitoes became visible near the white ceiling light, and the two men were reflected in the wide black windshield, the broken white line of the highway shooting up between them. The trucker took in Slaney's orange coveralls.

The mosquitoes were collecting on the inside of the windshield; the light made them glitter like splinters of glass. Slaney leaned forward and put his thumb against one. He looked at his thumb and there was the tiny squished insect, the wings crushed, and a touch of blood, probably Slaney's own.

Out for a midnight stroll? the trucker asked. Slaney rubbed his thumb against a seam in his coveralls.

Something like that, Slaney said. The driver looked at his watch. He said he'd been told Slaney would be farther up the road.

I thought I had a ways to go before I run into you, the driver said. You're lucky I never went on past. You come out in the wrong spot.

It was hard to judge where I was, Slaney said.

You didn't have directions?

I never had nothing.

You're lucky, the driver said.

I hope I am, Slaney said.

It comes and goes, the trucker said. Comes and goes.

The driver had a full black beard and moustache and thick greased hair that held the marks of the comb near his temple and hung in wet-looking ringlets over the back of his lumber jacket. He touched the ceiling light and it went off. He pulled the rig out onto the highway. Each wheel hitched itself up onto the asphalt with an arthritic lurch and the quivering machine became smooth and they took off.

Almost at once, three more cop cars with the lights on passed the truck and Slaney hunched down under the dash.

There's some dry clothes back there, the trucker said. He jerked his head toward a red blanket he'd nailed over the bunk behind them. Slaney saw the blue Samsonite overnight bag that belonged to his mother. Slaney's sister must have packed the bag for him.

He flicked the chrome locks with his thumbs and the suitcase popped up. There was a brown envelope with three hundred dollars and a slip of paper that had a phone number. It would be the number for Hearn. He memorized the number and crumpled the piece of paper and looked around for how

to dispose of it. There was an ashtray in the armrest but it was blocked with butts. He balled up the paper and swallowed it.

The three hundred would have been every cent his sister had.

Three pairs of jeans, underwear, socks, a jean jacket, and a cake tin with a Norman Rockwell illustration of a hobo fleeing with a stolen pie, a hound dog snapping at his trousers. He lifted the lid and there were chocolate chip cookies.

He took out one of the five plaid shirts and it was covered in cellophane and folded around a piece of cardboard, held in place with a number of straight pins. He took the pins out and laid them on the armrest where they shivered and rolled.

Slaney changed on the bunk. Then he felt around in the bottom of the case to see if his sister had packed a joint or two. There was a rent in the blue lining near the seam and something was caught in the threads. Slaney wiggled two fingers into the tear in the lining beneath the zippered pockets.

It was a ring. He pulled it free.

His mother's old engagement ring. His mother had lost the ring years ago during a hospital stay and they'd thought stolen. But no—it had fallen between the hard casing and the torn fabric. Slaney put the ring in the pocket of his new jeans and sat back down in the passenger seat and he and the trucker watched the empty highway before them.

We're going to take a little detour, the trucker said. He turned down a dirt road with dusty alder bushes grown so close the branches scraped at the truck. The wheels sank into deep potholes and climbed up over stones and they proceeded at a crawling pace, rocking from side to side, jerking up and down, all eighteen wheels, until the lane seemed so overgrown they might not be able to proceed or reverse. The trucker turned off the lights and killed the engine.

What's going on? Slaney asked.

I'm going to wait here for a bit, the trucker said. Take a little snooze. Let the cops do their thing.

He stood and hefted his jeans up over his belly and disappeared behind the red blanket. Slaney heard him flap the sheets and he heard the trucker's boots fall to the floor and his head hit the pillow.

Nothing stirred outside the cab except the twigs and branches scraping against the steel sides of the truck. The trucker's breathing became deep and steady, a long deep reeling in of air and a phlegmy whistle of exhalation that couldn't quite be called a snore.

Slaney heard a woodpecker knocking close by, deft and humourless. It was a beautiful noise. The windshield steamed up. He sat still for two hours and ten minutes.

The trucker finally let out a groan and he stumbled out from behind the blanket and seemed surprised to see Slaney, as if he'd forgotten all about him.

Oh, hello, he said. He got back into the driver's seat and felt around in his pockets for some gum and he offered Slaney a piece and Slaney said, No thanks.

The trucker removed the paper and the silver foil from a stick of gum and tossed them out the window and folded the stick into his mouth. Then he started up the truck. Slaney rolled down his window and tossed out his orange coveralls.

The truck broke out of the alder bushes onto the highway. Slaney reached back behind his chair for the cookie tin that had been in his mother's suitcase and removed the lid and the trucker took a cookie when it was offered and said it was good.

Slaney ate seven cookies. After a time the trucker reached under his legs and drew out a bucket of Kentucky Fried

Chicken and said that Slaney was welcome to all that was left. He handed the bucket over without taking his eyes off the road and Slaney took off the cardboard cover and inside there were several drumsticks and a bunch of paper napkins. Slaney cleaned the meat off the bones of each drumstick.

The whole bucket, the trucker said. Didn't they feed you in there?

It was a mystery to me, Slaney said, how they could call it food.

A while past dawn Slaney realized he had dozed off but he'd felt the driver suddenly become alert beside him.

There was something in the road.

A dayglo lime green object the size and shape of a tortoise.

It was phosphorescent and insubstantial and poisonous-looking; it had the jellyfish waver of something dreamt.

Slaney slammed his foot as if he had a brake on the passenger side. They hit the object. A crackling little *pock*.

It was a plastic spaghetti strainer. It smashed to bits under the tires and Slaney saw the pieces blow around through his side mirror. Luminous flecks of green plastic. The pieces remained aloft in the backdraft of the truck, spinning in a vortex, then fluttering down all over the asphalt.

Vigilance

Get the key to the room at the bar, Harold had told him. Say hello to my half-sister Sue Ellen.

The strip bar was on the highway with not much around it except a bungalow set way back from the road. There had been a garage but the gas pumps were removed and the dirty

window had been hit by a bullet. A sun-silvered hole the size of a quarter, a web of cracks that spread in concentric rings outward to the peeling window frame.

There were demolished cars in the field near the garage, all missing wheels and doors and the hoods were up, the engines were gone. A crippled school bus up to the axles in grass had a sodden Union Jack hanging out one of the windows. Beyond the garage stretched a field and there was the grandmother's bungalow with a tethered horse on the lawn. The horse was white and trotted in circles, flicking its head, slapping its tail.

Slaney could see Harold's grandmother out on her back porch hanging up the laundry. The line squeaked each time she flung it out over the field below.

He thanked the truck driver but they both just sat without moving.

I didn't expect to get this far, Slaney said. As soon as he said it, Slaney recognized the statement was true. He had believed he would get caught.

Right now four years in prison seems like a long time, the driver said. You'll lose that feeling. Then he said he hadn't wanted to get involved.

Aiding and abetting, he said. Slaney looked down at the late-morning fog on the road. The sun had already shrunk the shadows and was pelting down a warm, muggy heat. He wanted to find out if the room was available.

I got a new wife, the driver said.

You try to see what's coming but it shifts on you, Slaney said.

My wife wouldn't have condoned this, the trucker answered. She would have put her foot down.

They had been together in the cab through the night and Slaney had listened to the calls over the CB radio and there

was a lot of talk about his break. There were bears all over the road, the truckers said. Slaney had heard the broken late-night banter, half lost in bursts of static and jargon about sirens and the cops, about wives with cancer and a little girl named Nancy who had lost her first tooth and what the weather was like and he had learned the trucker went by the handle Woolie because of his beard. But Slaney and the trucker had hardly spoken at all.

Now that they had arrived the trucker wanted to talk. He spoke to Slaney about what he'd heard.

Slaney and his friend Hearn had lost more than a million dollars' worth of weed when they were busted and there were people in Montreal who had invested and they were looking for their money back.

I'm telling you this because I like your sister, the trucker said. Slaney thanked him and he assured the trucker he'd be careful and he said goodbye but the guy kept talking.

You walk away with a couple of busted kneecaps, consider yourself lucky. I knew a guy, they came at him with a mallet. Another guy lost an eye out of it.

How well do you know my sister? Slaney asked.

What the hell are you talking about, the trucker said. I'm married.

You said you liked her.

Jesus, not like that. I'm telling you this because your sister is a good kid. Doing social work, she helped me out. Nice young woman.

You don't need to tell me, Slaney said. The trucker scowled out the window. He jiggled the gearshift.

I stop for you in the middle of nowhere and you come up with this about your sister.

You're right, Slaney said. I'm sorry.

Another guy they put in a wheelchair, the trucker said. Slaney nodded.

The trucker spoke again: Another guy. Never mind about the other guy.

Well, thank you for the ride, Slaney said.

My wife and me only been together two years, the trucker said.

Maybe you don't need to mention to her, Slaney said. About all this.

The trucker said that not saying what happened was another variation of lying, but it was less damning. He told Slaney that he had learned how easy it was to tell a lie relatively late in his life, and found he'd had an aptitude for it. But as a child he had gravitated toward honesty.

Maybe everybody starts out that way, Slaney said.

It's just a matter of looking someone in the eye, the trucker said, and speaking as if you could hardly be bothered recounting the facts.

A woman came out of the front door of the bar with a red plastic bucket that sloped as she walked. She had a long skirt that flapped around her sandals with every step she took. She crossed the parking lot to the ditch and flung the water out and walked back with her head down. She seemed to be singing to herself.

Look them in the eye, Slaney said.

You look them in the eye or you look to the middle distance, the trucker said. He put on an expression, the expression he used when he was lying, to illustrate his point. It was a belligerent look, solemn and tinged with equanimity. Slaney saw it was the same expression the trucker used when he wasn't

lying. It might have been the only expression at his disposal.

Nobody doubts me, the trucker said. He shook his head a little as if this were a disappointment.

You're friendly, Slaney said. Everybody takes a shine.

I can lie as easily as I can butter a piece of bread, he said. But I tell you what. If I were you I'd keep my ears open. Even a lie you can learn something.

The trucker had a drive ahead of him but he still seemed reluctant to get back on the road. He'd been in prison a long time, he told Slaney. A lot longer than four years. He gave Slaney the look again.

I was in for a crime I didn't commit, he said. He did a drum roll on the steering wheel with two fingers. Slaney didn't know whether to believe him or not.

If you're young when you go in, you don't stay that way, the trucker said. He admitted that he didn't believe in God, though he'd tried for his wife's sake. She worked long shifts in an emergency ward as a nurse.

It's not the other prisoners or even the guards, he said. It's something else, prison is.

It's something else again, Slaney said. The trucker's face took on an open-eyed softness. He seemed to be looking at something that he could not believe. He flicked his hand through the air in Slaney's direction, batting away everything he'd just said.

Across the field Harold's grandmother picked up her laundry basket and went through the screen door and it closed behind her with a click that Slaney could hear from the parking lot of the bar. It was an intimate sound, carried on the breeze over the fields to the bone in his jaw.

You won't get very far, the trucker said. I'll tell you that.

I'm going to try, Slaney answered. He opened the door of the cab and jumped down and closed it. He stood back on the shoulder with his hands on his hips. The truck crept back onto the road and was gone down the highway.

A Room with a View

Slaney walked up the wheelchair ramp that led to the side entrance of the bar. From there he had a view of rows of cabbages and fields of hay. The clouds tumbled backwards in folds and billows all the way to the horizon.

The door was held open a crack with a stone and it was very dark inside and stank of beer and cigarettes. Someone had been smoking weed. There was a yellow cone of light over the pool table at the far end of the room.

The bartender was a scrawny woman with long silver braids tied at the ends with red glass bobbles. Her skin was tanned dark and her eyes were pale blue. She wore bibbed overalls and had a pack of cigarettes rolled up in the cuff of her white T-shirt. Two pairs of eyeglasses hung from chains around her neck. She was emptying ashtrays from the night before.

If you're here for the dart tournament it was yesterday, she said.

Harold sent me, Slaney said. He said maybe there was a room I could crash.

Harold say anything about child support for his three youngsters by two different mothers? the woman asked.

He never mentioned, Slaney said. She reached under the bar and shoved some things around on a shelf and came back up with a key on a wooden fob. She sent it sliding down the bar toward him.