

Michael Torrance fought to keep his eyes on the road; the dominating skyline was simply breathtaking and was demanding of his attention. The rental car swerved worryingly as his vision drifted again and he glanced over nervously at his sleeping wife.

Emily slept on undisturbed, and he sighed with relief. As much as he loved her, the last thing that he wanted was a screaming argument fuelled by exhaustion.

She had suggested that they spend the night at the airport motel after the long flight over from England, but he had been desperate to start their new life in the US as soon as possible. It was one of the few arguments that he had won successfully, the tiring travel seemingly robbing her temporarily of her argumentative powers.

The desert stretched out before him as they travelled west; the sloping canyons and sweeping mountains framed the horizon as far as he could see.

Michael was thirty four and his wife twenty nine. They had been married for five years with four and a half of them happy. He was English born and raised and had only ever travelled as far as Europe for holidaying purposes.

The sheer size and scale of the tiny slice of America that he had witnessed so far was startling. It was one thing to look at images online and imagine, but quite another to see it firsthand. Back in the UK there were rolling hills and green plains, but you would never see a horizon that was completely uninhabited.

As he drove, the space just seemed endless as the deserted highway stretched for an eternity and beyond. He had not seen a single car for over two hours now and he luxuriated in the quiet.

Michael was a solitary man by nature and by profession; he was a moderately successful writer of horror fiction. He wasn't about to give Stephen King's agent sleepless nights, but he made a living in the vocation; one that he would have happily maintained as a hobby, even if nobody wished to read his work.

He was a quiet man of means and tastes, and often mistaken as a little aloof and distant, but his wife carried the sociable torch in the family.

Emily was a teacher and shaper of young minds; she was light and airy where he could be dark and sullen. Emily was outgoing and gregarious; a free spirit, always eager to talk and meet strangers. Their union had baffled many of their independent friends, but they both felt that they filled a missing piece in the other.

Emily taught the equivalent of second grade, relishing the enthusiastic and open minds of children as yet unsullied by the world around.

They had met at a party some seven years ago. Michael had been dragged there by his literary agent who was determined to haul him away from a dark home office and a flickering computer screen. Michael had gone - not quite kicking and screaming, but it had been close.

The party was loud and boisterous and Michael had quickly faded into the background. At one point in the evening he had been having a discussion that had rapidly turned into an argument and was

threatening to escalate into a brawl. A drunken guest had started in on the disproportionate sentences being handed down to the participants of the previous year's rioting in the capital.

Michael was far from considering himself some right-wing extremist, but the terrifying loss of order and control had necessitated an extreme response. The drunk had been shouting loudly about the civil rights of the arrested when Michael had lost it.

"What about victims' rights?" he had raged. "Where are the civil liberties groups when it comes to victims? Where are the campaigns for helping them?"

"I suppose that you are part of the hang 'em and flog 'em brigade, are you?" the drunk had sneered, his expensive Chardonnay spilling. "You have no idea just what those rioters go through on a daily basis. The sheer desperation of their lives. They were looting just to survive."

"Survive?" Michael had exclaimed incredulously. "I could believe that, and come to understand it, if they were carrying out diapers and baby food, but they were taking gaming consoles, televisions, and trainers, you dozy prick."

"Oh, I wouldn't expect the likes of you to understand," the drunk had replied condescendingly.

"Well, the likes of me are going to give you a slap," Michael had replied, taking a menacing step towards the drunkard.

Suddenly a hand at his elbow stopped him mid-step; the drunk's date had appeared and looked up at him with gentle eyes. He was abruptly embarrassed by his behaviour. He looked around and saw that he was the outsider here; the judgmental eyes were all condemning him.

He had been seconds away from decking the annoying drunk and fulfilling his brutish stereotype in front of the middle-class audience. He was born of a working-class background but he was abundantly capable of handling an argument without resorting to violence.

"Don't I know you?" the woman asked him distractedly, ignoring her peers.

"I don't think so," he responded, suddenly desperate to leave the party and these people. He'd turned to leave the disapproving stares when he really saw her for the first time. She was around five feet six, slender and petite; she had thick, dark hair that hung in loose waves and the darkest eyes that he had ever seen. He fell deep into those beautiful black pits and was lost forever; they had left the party together and had never looked back.

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The hot sun beat down as he drove. He wore camouflage combat shorts and a light cotton shirt, but the heat was still merciless. The sky overhead was the bluest of blue, and wisps of white cloud floated slowly on the limited breeze.

The U-Haul trailer behind the rental car rattled along carrying their essentials. The road stretched ahead, holding their future and their new beginnings in fragile hands. Michael felt the sudden pressure in his bladder and pulled the car over to the hard shoulder. Rest stops appeared to be few and very far between on their journey so he figured that no one would mind if he took a leak out in

the open.

Emily's head bounced once as they stopped, but then was still again. He greatly envied her ability to sleep regardless of circumstance.

He exited the car and stretched, relishing the release as his spine cracked and neck popped. The narrow highway was still unsurprisingly deserted as he walked to the metallic crash barrier that lined the road and peered carefully over.

The canyon fell away sharply the bottom was only just visible. Gravel slipped over the edge as he moved too close and it echoed downwards on descent. He relieved himself over the edge and turned his face upwards to the warming sun with his eyes closed and a smile on his face. *A new beginning*, he thought.

Their courtship had been smooth and pleasant. Within weeks they'd already felt comfortable and content. There were no great movie style theatrics and histrionics, no professions of love in the rain, no last gasp dashes to the airport. They were in love from the start, and the bond only grew stronger over time. They had dated for only around four months before she moved into his apartment. They soon found that marriage was a logical and inevitable next step.

Michael discovered that the marriage had come quickly and relatively painlessly. Unlike a lot of women, he discovered that - like him - Emily was more interested in being married than getting married. Four years into the marriage, Emily had discovered that she was pregnant; both had accepted the news with happiness and no real surprise.

They had never sat down and planned their life together, but both simply knew that these were all things that were meant to be. Michael's career grew steadily; his readers were loyal and decent in number, Emily loved her work and all was as it should be. Perhaps if they'd suffered during their time together, then maybe they would have coped better with the first and only black cloud that fell.

Emily was six months pregnant and waddling pretty well; the night outside was black and the weather was foul. The English winter was in full swing with an icy chokehold, and the sleeting rain fell heavily, making the roads treacherous.

Michael was working away furiously, desperate to make his latest deadline when she had come to him requesting that he took a supply run. She had come into his office several times over the space of a couple of hours, each time receiving only a cursory glance, and a distracted promise that he would "go in a minute". Eventually, and with only minimal frustration, she had snatched up her coat and headed out into the cold, wet night.

Michael was only brought back into the real world when the pounding on his door grew to unavoidable levels; he'd opened the apartment door to a stony-faced policeman.