

## Personal Essay - The Trip

"You want to tell me a story?" she asks.

An imperceptible nod from behind the glass.

Her breathing is shallow and nervous. He hears the short wheezes over the phone line. He smiles.

A silent ripple of excitement races past her into the throng of detectives standing in the shadows behind her.

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Jess smiled as she picked up the knife with which she intended to use to kill her husband. The blade was fresh, and glinted satisfyingly in the dim light of her kitchen as she strained to listen to the plot of her favourite soap unfolding from behind her in the lounge. But it didn't make that whistling, slicing noise that she had imagined it would. Jess played with it for a while, stabbing the air. She reached into the fridge, wincing as she stretched, remembering her cracked ribs and hairline fracture in her forearm. The bastard! Having poured a glass of milk with the knife rooted firmly in her hand, she walked into the lounge, her limp reminding her of the night he had thrown her against the side of the bath and raped her. She laughed - she loved the fantastic melodrama of soap operas - but it hurt to laugh.

She walked into the huge hall of their house and waited, the marble floor glinting in the darkness. Tyres crunched the gravel on the road up to the house; a crescendo of panic and insane resolve rose up in her as she looked down at her hand; white and bloodless on the black grip of the knife. It would end tonight - there was no other possibility. A distinct pale band of skin was visible on the left ring finger of her tanned hands. Footsteps. Ragged and irregular as always, she could almost smell the Jack Daniels from where she stood. He was in the house, hanging up his jacket when she caught his eye.

Lunging towards him, she brought out the knife and began stabbing the air around him, praying she would hit him. Again she caught his eyes - his furious stare ripped through all of her courage and his fist raced towards her face. She landed on the floor with an ominously quiet thud and her eyes flickered, then glazed. Something oozed onto the marble floor and the knife clattered to the ground, declaring a hollow silence in the hallway.

"Stupid bitch." Jack hoped, for his sake, that she was not dead, but did not bother to reach down and check. Stepping over her, he took his jacket and slammed the door behind him. Sitting back on the sumptuous leather of his car, Jack cursed as he realised he had her blood on his suit. It had cost him \$2000, and the knife had torn the left shoulder. He was sure she was sleeping with Pete, that leering snake from work. That bruise would teach her. He needed a fix - it had been over four hours and the high was wearing off. The black BMW raced towards the centre of town.

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"Maggie Peters died last night. Did you kill her?" she asks, too scared to speak louder than a whisper over the phone as he stares into her eyes.

He laughs. He is paralysed, locked in a wheelchair in a secure cell, but she is still petrified as a sickening grin emerges on his face.

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Driving downtown was always an eye opener for a man with a salary the size of a telephone number, and this was no exception. The wet streets were a reptilian skin, swelling with the yellow and red lights of the strip bars and fast food joints; the acid rain its rancid sweat. Long legs in short skirts dipped daringly onto the road, tired eyes calling from behind a mask of make-up, lipstick and choking perfume. Prostitutes were everywhere, with a swarm of seedy men hovering around their smell like flies. Jack hated these people. In fact, he would have

eradicated all of the scum that inhabited the area, but he had one thing on his mind. He parked the car; eyes peering at him from behind dirty windows.

A ring of smoke rose dreamily up into the air, illuminated by a weak light that dangled from the ceiling. The muffled sound of jazz piano floated in through the walls. No other sound. A man sat there in the shadows of the light, playing with something in his hands, skirted by a trio of men in suits. Jack had been here before, and waited patiently and silently at the other end of a six-foot table that consumed most of this nondescript room. The ring of light only just graced the bottom of each man's face. Jack could see the dark glow of gold draped from the man's neck in the shadows. There was a tension that was alien to him.

"So, Mr Pearson. Here for a little fix, are we?" Jack could not help but laugh slightly at how much of a cliché the man and this situation were, and answered.

"Yes." He was not in a talkative mood, and his laugh was swallowed hungrily by the silence and thick blue smoke.

A small packet skidded across the walnut table and the man leaned into the light. There was the right amount of a white powder in it, so Jack retorted with an equally abrupt skid across the frictionless surface. Counting the money with his hands, the man dropped a ring onto the table in a way too rehearsed to be accidental, and smiled. Three stones - two diamonds and sapphire, gleaming in the light. Jack recognised it. But from where?

"Have a nice trip," the man jeered as he saw Jack frowning at the ring through blood shot eyes.

A hollow laugh.

Jack was sitting in his car waiting for the euphoric rush of the drug, trying to remember where had seen the ring on the table. He was sure he had bought it. Was it Jess's? He longed to go back to the man and demand an answer, but he would not escape those bodyguards. The irrational paranoia of withdrawal was desperately eating away at him...

Suddenly the lights shone brighter, the smell of grease was stronger, the music even louder. At one moment he felt as if he knew everything happening on the street, his heart beating to the time of the music blaring from the pavements. Yet his paranoia was not shirked, merely fortified by the synthesised testosterone flowing through his veins. Jack grabbed the steering wheel and the car screeched away in the direction of his office building.

The traffic lights all seemed a blur - that was green, right? He had never driven while high before. Fuelled by suspicion and anger, the drug reached the farthest corners of his body as a tingling, pulsating wave of warmth. Life was being breathed back into Jack, an artificial, all-consuming life that overrode his judgment and perceptions. Driving with one hand Jack opened the dash and a blue-black flash of metal winked back at him.

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She is trying to evade his glance. His breathing is slow and steady, and its hissing is too much for her to hold the phone close to her ear.

"Stan, I think you shot Garry Hollands in the head with the gun from your dashboard on the same night you killed your wife, Maggie." The rest of the police team is huddled around her, listening to his every word.

His heart rate is failing, slowly. He asks her to let him finish.

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The black BMW screeched into Jack's space at the car park of his firm. He knew that Pete would still be there, doing enough paperwork to steal Jack's position within the tax year. He could not steal Jack's wife and his job, and Jack squeezed the oily mass of metal in his left hand for reassurance. The lift was dark as he ascended inevitably to the fifteenth floor. In the darkness, the glow of the drug was all he sensed, but there was a dull ache in his feet that seemed to be rising up his body. It was like nothing he had ever experienced, but nothing he

felt he needed to worry about.

Pete hated working late. His wife and kids were planning their summer holiday to Grenada and he hated missing it, but he had to finish the work that Jack had left for him. Beyond the light of his desk, there was a pool of blackness. A green light went on above the lift. Pete thought it must have been the safety guard. The soft bell rung. Pete did not look up, but carried on working.

Jack emerged from the thick darkness and aimed the gun at Pete's head. Pete stopped what he was doing and in the dim light, Jack saw all colour drain from his face. All of Jack's jealousy, anger, and fear were concentrated on the eyes that pleaded with him from beyond the barrel of the gun. It was exhilarating, watching him squeal. Jack could only hear the sound of his own excited breathing. All he wanted was control of his life and that moment he had it: control over his cheating wife and his unstable city job. A sharp pain was shooting up his legs. His breathing was becoming difficult and he felt as if he was being choked. He saw Pete trying to escape and pulled the trigger. As Pete slumped to the floor. Jack felt his legs give way.

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Silence. His heart rate monitor beeps erratically.

He blinks, and she knows he is finished. He had been found squirming in a pool of Garry Hollands' blood the night before, paralysed by a dose of poisoned cocaine. Now, it is slowly killing him.

"Did you like that story, Sarah?" His voice startles her.

"I believe Jack sounds uncannily like you, Stanley." The beeps begin to gather pace as the poison enters his heart.

He grins at her. "Oh no no. Jack's just another guy trying to regain control. Post-modern casualty, you might say."

He takes a deep breath.

"Have you ever heard of drug-induced paranoia? An awful thing, you might agree, Sarah. Leads to all sorts of trouble. Now that you mention it. Jess and Pete seem just like Maggie and Garry, don't they?" His voice is laced with menace.

"Was that a confession, Mr Peters? Double homicide is a serious offence." She hated him calling her by her name.

He looks at her and then at the monitor, smiling all the time. His eyes flicker.

The beeps merge into one long, high-pitched drone that sounds over the phone line.