
Run

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This is an original shorty story and has
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***"The road is straight.
The way is long.
The night is short."***

--Cornell Woolrich

Clark Logan heard his right cheek go with a soft, wet crack before the pain from the blow caught up with the sound. The blow sent him sprawling. He struck an umbrella stand which clattered to the hard wood floor. Stars from the flashlight beam flashed into his eyes just prior to the punch blinded him. His fedora tumbled from his head and he landed hard.

Before he could twitch, a hard toe dug savagely into his stomach and he tasted bile. He tried to roll with it but came up against the wall, smacking the back of his head. Sensing a second kick, he threw himself to the side and heard the hard-soled shoe clack against the wall followed by a frustrated grunt from one of his attackers.

"Finish him!" a voice rasped. "Stop screwing around."

The reply was a harsh curse and Logan heard heavy feet coming towards him in the dark. It was 2 AM, a moonless night. The lights were out in the apartment, shades drawn.

Logan flailed about with one hand while digging under his left armpit with the

other for his gun. His breath came, a thin wheeze-and his broken cheek felt like a mouse was burrowing beneath the skin under his left eye.

The gun was snapped home and his thumb missed the clasp as he pawed at it. His other hand felt the leg of a hall table and he yanked it between himself and his attacker.

The man's shins made a pleasant sound in Logan's ears as they collided with the table. The man fell hard onto Logan's legs, his teeth momentarily pressing into the side of Logan's right calf. Logan didn't hesitate. He stomped his feet at the spot where he thought his attacker's head lay. The first kick struck air but the second caught a layer of soft, yielding flesh, which gave until his heel hit bone. He tried to slash upwards with the edge of his heel to open the skin.

"Ah!" Screeched from the dark encouraged him as he heard the impact.

He kicked again but hit air. The weight was off his legs so he scrambled to his feet. The sound of rustling cloth and the scrapping of leather told him the second man was going for his piece.

Logan jabbed his hand inside his coat, seized the butt of the .38 and yanked for all he was worth. The gun came free. He pointed it where he thought his attackers were and pulled the trigger at the same instant as the other man. Two yellow tongues of flame lanced out, then Logan heard the plaster crack beside him. He heard a loud hiss from in front of him and the sound of someone stumbling. He sprayed three more shots around the room.

Logan started to run, the window and fire escape his destination, but slipped on his hat-pitching headlong across the threshold leading to the bedroom.

Moving across the dark room to the window on the other side of the Murphy bed Lois had left down, he caught the stale scent of her perfume.

The window was an alternating square of black and dull red from the flashing neon outside.

The noise behind him told Logan the men, or at least one of the men, had recovered and was moving into the room with only the bed between them. It was difficult to hear with the rain rattling against the tin sign.

He fired blindly and dove for the window. There was no return fire as he flew through the air. He thought he'd made it until he cracked his right knee on the sill.

He sprawled out onto the fire escape, teeth clamped shut against a bellow of pain. Gun in hand, he was in a slight freefall, trying to keep his weight off his right knee, almost falling down the iron ladder; which ended eight feet from the ground. The drop was going to play hell with his knee but if he stayed-he was a sitting duck.

Movement from above made the fire escape quiver and spurred Logan into action.

There was a pile of mushy cartons near three metal garbage cans. He aimed for it and the soggy cardboard gave like tissue paper beneath him. He tried to hit and roll to keep the weight off his knee but it took enough to make him cry out as red-hot daggers pierced the joint. The cry echoed up the alley and was followed by a gunshot.

Logan staggered to his feet, clothes sodden, mouth full of wet cardboard. He managed two lurching steps towards the street as a flashlight beam speared the inky blackness of the alley. Logan thanked his lucky stars that the light over the service door was out. Then he cursed those stars as he saw a man, drawn by the noise, appear at the mouth of the alley. The gun in the man's hand told Logan this was not the cavalry coming to his rescue.

He backed up, tried the service door.

Locked.

The man eased up the alley. Logan tried to run but the knee went spongy after a dozen steps and he fell. This saved him as a bullet whizzed by over his head.

Footsteps echoed behind him. The man was running and would soon be joined by his companions making that racket on the fire escape. Logan hauled himself up, forcing his legs into a shuffling run. The opening of the alley and brightly lit street seemed

miles away.

The fire escape gave one last shutter. Now the sound of two sets of footsteps bounced off the walls.

A few more agonized steps would bring him to the street where he'd be lit up like a roman candle for two guns to take shots at; and the feet behind him were gaining.

Salvation came in the form of a metal dumpster tucked just inside the alley. Logan got behind it as a shot spanged off its side. It was not perfect cover but by crouching he could make it to the street. The pulsating red neon of the hotel sign turned the puddled water into wine and back again like some kind of quantifiable miracle.

Being hunched over didn't help his knee. The pain was like molten steel rods shoved in on either side of his leg as he whipped around the corner of the hotel. He made the street but wasn't out of the woods yet. He'd never reached his heap before they were on him.

A trolley was passing the running men heading towards Logan. He watched, gauging its speed. When it was within reach to him he hobbled into the street after it.

Before he could hop aboard, the conductor-having heard the shot increased speed. The car slewed by Logan's outstretched hand and clanked and gurgled away.

The men were in the street, guns raised. Logan was raising his when a shrill whistle blast behind him announcing the trolley's mate was making its way up the line in the other direction. Logan was standing on the gleaming rails set in the pavement.

He leapt back, then up onto the moving car, using the side as protection. Peeking up through a closed window, he saw his attackers contemplate jumping aboard, but the cabin lights were out and they didn't want to risk catching a bullet from the shadows. Logan watched them turn and head back up the alley.

He glanced around and saw the conductor staring at him. Logan looked like hell, & he knew it. Sopping wet from head to toe, hatless, and a bruise like a squashed plum under one eye.

The man was middle-aged with a salt and pepper handlebar mustache and a large round head squeezed into his billed conductor's cap pressed down on his wide-set sky-blue eyes. He swayed to the streetcar's movement on thick legs.

"Men with guns," Logan said, easing up to his feet. "Determined men with guns."

"Why that distinction?"

"Because they saw me hop aboard and we're passing the alley they took to retrieve their chariots."

Logan saw the gist of the situation dawn on the conductor's red face just as the headlights from the alley illuminated the inside of the trolley. He caught the sound of a racing motor over the noise of the streetcar.

The conductor knew what to do. With a dissatisfied grunt, he gave the trolley more throttle and the car lurched forward. There was a right turn up ahead which they took with a screech of metal wheels. There were two other passengers who didn't take kindly to the jostling!

"Look, friend," the conductor said. "What have you dragged me into!?"

Logan was staring back along the length of the car out the rear windows at the headlights steadily gaining on them. He tightened his grip on the .38, then turned to the conductor.

"I wish I knew," he said. "Look, these guys are gaining! Anything you can do?"

"This is a trolley not a rocket ship!"

The headlights, right behind them now, turned to the left, momentarily lost from view. Logan saw the car as it stopped for a second and a dark shadow hopped out. The car was moving before the shadow could close the door and the man was almost clipped by it! He dodged and began jogging up behind the streetcar.

Logan watched him for a moment, trying to figure out what was behind this action, when the car raced up alongside the trolley. He ducked beneath the windows, gun ready. But the driver of the car did not slow. He continued ahead of the triangular

snow catcher jutting from the front of the streetcar.

With a squeal of rubber, he yanked the car over until the nose was in the trolley's path.

"Hold on to your hats!" the conductor yelled before the point of the snow catcher punctured the metal door on the passenger side of the car blocking the tracks. There was a shriek of metal tearing and sparks leapt from the rails. The trolley lurched, its momentum cut by the heavy four-door sedan.

Logan was thrown forward with the other passengers. He got to his feet and made it back to the front of the trolley as it grinded forward, slowing. Through the broken glass of the front windows, he saw the driver of the touring car get out from behind the wheel, gun drawn and jump clear.

With the other gunman pulling up the rear, they had him boxed in!

A quick look at his revolver told him he had only one shot left.

"You wouldn't happen to have a Tommy gun?"

"I'd trade it for a bottle of aspirin if I did." The conductor replied, rubbing the side of his face.

The driver of the car was almost on top of them. He had a big .45 aimed at the passenger windows, thinking Logan was hiding back there.

Well, with a gungel coming up behind, Logan had no time to waste. Through a hole in the glass the size of a grapefruit, he drew a bead on the man in front and fired his remaining shot. The bullet plowed into the big man's middle

He crumpled, falling to the concrete.

The gun slipping from the man's fist, bouncing on the rain-wet pavement, was all Logan needed to see. He clambered down the steep, narrow steps.

He hobble-ran to the man, bent over his attacker, and picked up the .45, put the .38 in his waistband and leaned over the dying man.

"What's it about?" he yelled, holding the dying man by the lapels. "Why've you

guys got it in for me! C'mon, give!"

The sound of footsteps coming closer reached Logan.

He needed to keep moving.

There was a walking court leading back to the hotel and he started for it, ducking low, his knee still in red hot pain, shooting glances back to make sure he wasn't spotted.

A loud screech made him pause and look back. The other gunman had stopped next to a brown coupe that pulled up.

It was too late to hide.

He entered the court, running as fast as his injured knee would allow. The squeal of tires behind him said that his pursuers were re-joining the fray. He hobbled faster past the dark storefronts. Logan heard the engine noise swell behind him.

Up ahead he saw a dangling fire escape ladder. If he could get up there, raise his legs, the car would pass by beneath him. An obstacle in his way was the low hedge running in front of the ladder alongside of a four-story walkup.

The engine roared behind him. He tried to increase his speed but the knee wouldn't take it and almost gave out on him.

He reached the hedge, the front bumper of the car on his heels. With all the strength he could muster he leapt, arms over his head, hands hooked to grab hold of the bottom rung.

But it was not to be. His clawed hands passed six inches from the wet iron and gravity pulled him down into the path of the speeding car.

What saved Logan was the recessed stairwell under the hanging ladder blocked from view by the hedge. Logan fell into the black depth and the car rocketed over his head!

He landed on something soft, yielding, & foul-a stack of old mattresses. He tumbled face down into the fetid mess as the front end of the car crumpled into the far edge of the hole over his head. The back reared up, threatening to come down into the

sunken stairwell! But at the last moment it crashed to one side!

Anxious to be free of the horrid bedding and away from the scene of the accident, he scrambled up the stairs, eased past the canted rear end of the jammed car.

He hobble-ran around the smashed front end of the car and saw a sprawled rumpled shape in the street. A spreading pool of crimson poured out from the head of the dead man; an arm was raised, crooked-at a grotesque angle.

He continued up the street.

He found himself back outside the hotel where the nightmare had started.

There was his heap.

He increased his speed.

He got his key out as he ran towards his yellow Packard.

"There!" A voice behind him shouted. "That's him!"

Guns roared-car windows shattered all around him.

His nervous fingers jigged and jagged until he was finally able to insert the key in the lock. He dove behind the wheel.

He stabbed the key in the ignition! The motor roared lustfully. Logan slammed the car into gear and stomped on the gas. The Packard responded, thrusting out into the deserted street.

They opened up on his car. Both rear windows blew inwards, taking the curtains with them.

He was clear now. He glanced in the rearview and saw the men running after him, guns blazing! Logan heard a shot strike the trunk with a muffled boom.

Common sense came to them faster than Logan would have preferred and they stopped firing to run for their autos. He had a slight lead and needed to increase it. Eyes darting to the rearview, he gave his machine all it could handle and his pursuers receded into the night.

He was in a residential neighborhood comprised of apartment blocks and hotels

like the one where he was to meet Lois. Lois? Christ! Where was she?

A glance in the rearview showed him headlights behind him, yellow dots growing larger like dilating pupils. The speedometer needle was hovering on seventy.

The headlights were almost on him now. As the car behind shot through each patch of light from the streetlights, the metal grill between the glowing yellow eyes flashed, shining like so many teeth trying to take a bite out of Logan's Packard.

He spun the Packard into a sharp left turn, stomping on the gas. The street was one-way, narrow with parked cars on either side. There was no room for them to flank him.

The first car behind him lurched forward. The ends met and Logan rocked with the impact! One of the cars tried a couple of shots but gave it up.

The one-way widened up ahead for a small business section. Logan cursed his luck. There was no turn off. Nowhere to go.

Once on the wider lanes, Logan's pursuers flanked out three abreast. They roared up the avenue past the closed up stores. The two end cars raced ahead trying to get on either side of his while the one in the middle gave him another bump.

The car on the left was creeping up. Logan hauled the wheel over slamming into the other car. The car swerved with the impact, hit a patch of wet pavement and skidded, swapping ends once before striking the curb and flipping over.

One down.

The loss of the car gave the one directly behind Logan something to chew on and the driver dropped back.

The driver on the right had a different way of looking at things and kept pace with Logan. He eased closer until the two cars raced up the street barely inches apart.

The driver pulled a Colt .45 out of his waistband and wanted to use it but had to keep his eyes on the road at the speed they were going. His companion in the back seat had other ideas. He flung open his door and, before Logan could cut closer and squash

him, he leapt onto the Packard's running board.

Suit flapping in the wind, the man yanked open the passenger door of the Packard and climbed in!

While this was going on, Logan had prepared for the gent's arrival by buckling his seat belt. When the guy was half in, Logan stood on the brakes and the guy hit the windshield like an errant bee on the interstate. The impact broke his gun hand before the momentum shoved the side of his head against the thick glass. He hit with a wet smacking sound, then flopped face down on the passenger seat. The passenger side door was flung open by the impact & the gunman was hanging half in half out of the Packard. His head leaked blood onto the upholstery, his feet dragged and bounced along the pavement.

Logan was thrown forward but the seat belt across his lap and the fact that he was ready for the sudden stop, meant he only chipped a tooth on the steering wheel. He dragged the gunman back in. Stars danced before his eyes. He made the mistake of shaking his head to clear it and almost passed out.

His driving became erratic and he swerved all over the road, almost plowing into the parked cars on either side. His driving closed the passenger door with a loud slam! On the plus side, his pursuers, wary, fell back to give themselves braking room in case of a smash up.

Logan's head did clear enough for him to shift gears, lay on some speed and put more distance between him and the tailing cars. The light was changing up ahead and he saw a small convoy of news trucks marching out with the morning edition. They were approaching the intersection as the light turned red.

Logan gave the Packard all it could take and shot passed the lead truck. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of a moon-faced driver, mackinaw perched atop his head, stogie hanging out of his open mouth.

Then he was through the intersection.

A quick glance in the rearview showed him the black sedan behind strike the lead truck a glancing blow that stabbed out one of the headlights and crumpled a fender.

Two down.

The impact also knocked the car off course and it scraped along two parked cars, coming to a stop across the intersection.

Make that three.

Logan whipped around the first corner he came to, gunned the Packard up a couple of blocks, swung left for one block, then right for two more, then left again. Though he was sure he'd eluded his pursuers, he only eased up slightly on the gas. They'd found him before and could do it again he had no doubt.

His traveling companion writhed and groaned incoherently beside him. Logan felt about as much sympathy for him as he would show for a spider in the kitchen sink. He reached over and shoved the man's shoulder, hard.

The man rolled back against the door and his eyes focused for a moment before they started to roll up in his head and his mouth went slack.

"Don't even think about it!" Logan yelled, shoving the guy again.

The man's face suddenly hardened, the tough exterior he'd spent years building into his face instantly appeared as if he were stepping through a black curtain. The muck's eyes had 'no vacancy' lights behind them but at least the lights were on and that was enough for Logan.

"Stay with me, fella, or I'll toss you out of this machine." Logan's voice brought the man all the way back. His gaze sharpened and his brow dove over his deep-set eyes.

"Stop the heap!" the man growled. "Or I'll -- "

He pawed under his arm for the revolver Logan had beside him between the seat and the door. Logan held it up, driving with one hand along the deserted streets.

"Looking for this?" he asked.

The passenger put his working hand flat on his thigh, unmoving but tensed and

ready. His eyes bore into Logan - hungry eyes waiting for that one instance of weakness.

"So we understand each other," Logan said. "If I can't shoot when you make your move, I'll put us into a wall instead. So you're better off not making a play."

"We'll see."

"You're right there, friend." Logan tooled the car around a corner and gunned down the motor. The car shot up a long residential straightaway bordered by a park.

"I've got questions, I want answers."

"Screw you, lug," the man replied.

Logan took a moment to swallow this, staring out at the black asphalt. The man shifted slightly in his seat so he was facing Logan. He pulled his feet in while his good hand slid slightly forward on his thigh.

"It's going to be like that, huh." Logan said.

"Yeah," the man replied. "Just like that."

Logan stood on the brakes and the Packard skidded along the wet pavement gracefully.

Instinctively, the man thrust his good arm up, hand out protectively. The coarse, blunt hand was driven into the dash. The wrist went first with a low, muffled crack followed by the elbow joint, then finally the right shoulder.

The man's body struck the unyielding dash with terrific force snapping a few ribs. Luckily he rebounded from the impact before momentum drove his head through the windshield.

Logan, seeing the man flop back onto his seat, lifted his foot off the brake and stomped down on the gas. The Packard was once again barreling up the deserted street.

"How's it going to be now?" he asked, shooting a look at his sprawled passenger.

The man's eyes darted frantically as agony had temporarily blinded him to reason.

"Keep it together, friend," Logan said. "Who do you work for?"

"Marino," the man hissed.

"Who's this Marino when he's home?"

The man managed a snarl. "He's the guy who'll finish you."

"A cheap hood." Logan shook his head.

The man stiffened. "Marino owns this town."

"Okay. An expensive hood." Logan drove on, considering. "I don't get it. What did I do to have this Marino set his dogs on me?"

"You tumbled his girl."

"What --? You mean Lois?"

The man nodded, easing up the seat. He rested his head against the closed window behind him.

"Try anything and I'll bounce you again," Logan cautioned.

A train whistle caught Logan's attention and he aimed the car in the direction the sound seemed to be coming from.

"Christ!" he spat. "I just met the dame this afternoon."

"Marino don't care about that. You made her and that's enough. He's explained that to her by now. If you get me. No skin off my nose. Me, I just follow orders. Same as the guys back there trying to pick up the scent."

The train whistle sounded again. Closer. Logan didn't have time to grieve for Lois just now. He gave the car more gas, his gaze fixed on the winking lights up ahead.

"Keep dreaming, fella. You and your scurvy crew can go hang for all I care! This is where I get off."

"Marino's put a bounty on your head that's too fat to pass up. Everyone in this town will be gunning for you."

"There's one gunsel who won't be."

The man read Logan's eyes and levered himself up in his seat until his head and shoulders rose above the dash. Knowing the guy had to make his play now, Logan

stomped on the brakes, bracing himself by placing his forearms on the wheel.

The man was a tan blur as he was launched through the windshield. He managed a fraction of a startled scream on the way. The crash of shattering glass and ripping fabric and skin raked the air like nails on a chalkboard.

The Packard skidded to a stop at the railway crossing. The man lay sprawled on the tracks in the headlight beams.

Logan killed the engine, threw back the seat belt and climbed out of the car. He slid the hood's gun into his waistband. The train whistle shirked across the still night.

The freight came around the bend, a shaky, feeble light steadily growing in the intensity, marking the train's approach.

It was on Logan in an instant -a cacophony of clatter and rhythmic booms. He waited for a moment, judging speed and picking his spot, then hobbled alongside as an open boxcar rumbled by.

His bad leg hampered him but the train was still getting up a head of steam and though he stumbled on the loose gravel, he kept pace. Reaching out, he seized the cold metal handle of the car and hoisted himself inside. The car had a closed, fetid odor. Damp, limp straw flew out as he probed deeper into the car he had all to himself. His fumbling hands found a musty blanket hanging from a peg on the wall. He took the blanket to an open door and bundled it so he could sit.

Feet dangling over the gravel streaking by, he took a moment to catch his breath. It had been a night like no other he'd experienced this side of war.

In Europe a soldier got used to dodging death's greedy grasp. Chaos was as normal as church bells on Sunday.

But Logan thought he'd put all that behind him. Since his discharge twenty-four hours before, he'd made an effort to immerse himself in the blessed banality of peace; a hot meal in a good restaurant, the cushioned comfort of movie theatres, the bright energy of a live show, the scrape of shoe leather on a quiet sidewalk, slow talk in a smoky

bar and the sound of the wind through fat, green leaves.

All these he'd employed to crowd out the whiz of a close bullet and the death cries of men holding their insides together while hell itself erupted all around and a guy never knew when or if he'd found the wrong place at the wrong time.

And he'd met Lois. She was a good kid. Seemed a little edgy. Now Logan knew why. They'd danced and dined, then danced some more before calling it a night and going back to her place.

Logan had been eager after three years overseas but his physical longing was tempered by the need for something a little more lasting, something beyond simple physical gratification. Because that, too, had been part of every GI's experience over there. A frantic coupling with the natives in exchange for food or, later, for liberation. And the whores still plying their lifeless trade with death all around.

The train was slowing, Logan felt a lurch as it switched tracks then continued on, its speed remaining constant.

Now this, Logan thought derisively. Cold beers and a few laughs resulting in broken bones and bodies strewn all over the asphalt.

Well, he was out of it. That's what mattered.

Sour bile built up in Logan's throat. Sure, it didn't matter in the end where he hung his hat. But he had liked this place. With or without Lois, it was a fine town and he hated to leave it.

Only he wasn't leaving, was he? He was running away. Like a scared rabbit. All because of scum like Marino.

Back in the war, he'd run from bullets and his own dark depths of mind. He had, however, never shown cowardice. Until now.

The train was picking up speed again. Logan stood up, picked his spot and jumped down. The gravel crunched and rattled under his feet and his knee reminding him there was something rotten in the state of Denmark, grudgingly supported his weight.

Logan began a ramshackle trot along the length of the train. The wind buffeted him and he liked it as it cooled the sweat on his skin. The lit crossing gleamed like a firefly and he ran towards it.

The man was gone, a red smear marking the spot. Logan stared at it grimly, adjusting the .45 in his waistband before heading for his Packard.

He swept the glass off the hood, grateful for the two-paned windshield. The glass was unbroken on the driver's side.

He slid behind the wheel, fired the engine to life. The Packard swung like a pendulum and he barreled back into town.

THE END