
“The Promise” by Matt McGovern

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Carol Wood leaned forward, snuffing out her half-smoked cigarette in the dashboard ash tray. She tried to smile. Still steering her *Honda Civic* with one hand, she fumbled with the channel selector on the radio, tuning in a local FM station. A familiar “Beatles” tune thumped tin-like sounds out of her two-for-\$20, yard sale speakers.

Most of the trees along the edge of the road she was driving looked skeletal. Cool October temperatures had nearly stripped them of their leaves. Today, the air seemed deliciously brisk to her—mind-clearing. She had risen early, following what was probably the first good night's sleep she'd had in weeks, and fixed herself a hot coffee. After that, a steaming shower had washed away the tiredness, and when she heard the paper boy come and go—his nine-year old footsteps falling lightly on the porch outside her trailer door—she had gone to fetch the morning news without hesitation, unlike so many other days the last two months when she hadn't budged from her couch in the living room until one, maybe two o'clock in the afternoon.

Today Carol felt as though she might be able to do it . . . as though she might be able to start over again.

There was an intersection ahead.

Carol stopped the car, looked both ways carefully, and then went straight. The road sign had been knocked at an angle and rust had begun to grow like a cancer where the paint was scraped, but she could still read it: *EAST JAY ROAD*. Two months had come and gone since she had last passed this way, but Carol felt as though she could drive the twisting, winding road with her eyes closed. She thought of how many times she had been this way before; how many times she had asked her Dad for the keys to the car to go out on another date with Travis.

Carol smiled. She felt a tear trace a cool path down her right cheek. It splashed on her hand as she reached hurriedly to wipe it away. A strong memory was trying to force its way out.

“No please . . .”

She looked to her right and spotted a herd of dairy cows lining the edge of a rocky pasture that stretched for acres over low, rounded hills. Some of the cows turned their heads as her

little red car sped by. Others seemed more interested in finding the last few clumps of green grass among the withering shoots of hay.

She slowed to round a sharp corner, and then seemed to travel from day into night as the trees formed a canopy over the road. A memory too strong for Carol to suppress forced itself out of the darkness.



Seven weeks ago.

Carol was a passenger in a long, black car.

Behind, lost somewhere in the fog and drizzle that had started in the early morning was a long line of slow-moving vehicles. Ahead, there was a dark object obscured by the rain on the windshield and the tears in Carol's eyes. The sound of the wipers as they swept back and forth was rhythmic and somber.

Carol was not alone in her sadness. Sitting across from her in the limousine were a man and woman looking very old and tired. They were Travis's parents.

"I'm sorry," Carol whispered hoarsely to them, but the woman's weeping only grew louder while the man's sagging eyes seemed to beckon: "Why wasn't it you?"



A dog darted across the road. Carol slammed her foot on the brake pedal and brought the car to a sliding stop in the middle of the deserted road.

"Ooooh," she sighed, resting her head on the steering wheel. She could feel tears swelling in her eyes. Her heart was racing. Shifting her foot from the brake to the gas, Carol started the car moving slowly. The dog—one of the black labs she and Travis always used to see walking the road—chased alongside, barking for a while until it fell behind and finally gave up.

At the foot of the next hill, Carol veered off the road and parked in a gravel drive next to a bubbling stream. She turned the ignition off and jingled the keys in her hand. Carol remembered how she and Travis used to visit this place often, picnicking down on the rocks next to those deep, sunny pools. She strained to see that familiar spot.

"I remember when Travis fell in," she whispered, almost laughing. Travis had been clowning around on the rocks when he stepped on some wet moss and went sprawling backwards—almost like those old iced-tea commercials—landing in a big splash. Carol remembered that his acrobatics had sprayed enough water on their picnic lunch to ruin it.

She rolled down the car window and listened to the rushing water.

"We used to close our eyes and dream we were on some tropical beach . . ."

A dump truck roared by on the road behind her, kicking up dirt and gravel. She coughed as a diesel cloud swept into the car.

"Damn trucks!"

Carol winced, squashing a thought before it could rise.

"No. I refuse. I refuse," she insisted.

The sound of the huge dump droned away in the distance. She put the palm of her hands over her eyes and pushed gently.

"No tears. Please . . . no more tears."

She slumped against the seat.

"I can't do it Travis. I just can't. I thought today was the day, but I can't . . ."



She saw Travis slip the engagement ring over her trembling finger . . .

She heard him propose . . .

She felt his shaking hands in hers as they spoke their wedding vows . . .

She felt him holding her in his arms as they danced their song at the reception . . .

She felt his mustache tickle her nose as they kissed . . .

She saw her little cousin's toothy smile as she caught the bouquet . . .

She remembered the taste of the frosting as she wiped cake from the tip of her nose . . .

She remembered everyone throwing rice on the way out, and seeing Travis's pick-up truck covered with streamers and balloons . . .

She remembered the sound of everyone's laughter . . .

She saw their smiles and then . . .

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“N-n-no, not that too . . .”

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The night was humid.

Travis and Carol were on the way to their honeymoon spot—Carol's Mom and Dad's summer camp nestled far back in the western Maine woods on the side of a pine-covered mountain. They had ridden most of the way with the truck windows down, letting the cool rushing air spill over their perspiring faces. A crescent moon was barely visible above the blackened tree line and the sky was teeming with stars.

“Make a wish,” Travis said to his new bride. Carol looked over at him, studying his eyes in the light from the dashboard.

“You're gonna be mad,” she said softly. “But I've got to go . . . I've got to go pee!”

“That's your wish?” He asked.

“No, I've already got that.” She squeezed his hand. “But I've REALLY got to go.”

“Ah, the romance of it all,” Travis chuckled. He sighed, “There's nowhere to stop until we get to camp you know. That's still another half hour.”

“At about this point any tree will do,” she said. “Please pull over before I explode.”

Travis stopped next to a promising spot of forest. “Need any help?” he asked as she climbed down out of the truck cab.

“No, but I will take a flashlight,” she said, searching the glove compartment.

“Just go right there,” Travis advised. “It's late. There won't be anyone on the roads.”

“I'll just go over in these bushes.” She pointed.

Travis laughed. “Where's a camera when you need one?”

Carol walked into a nearby thicket, turning so she could see the truck headlights through spaces in the trees. She listened to the hum of the motor. She . . .



“No!” Carol screamed, slamming her hand on the steering wheel.

The horn blared.

“No!”

She pounded again and again until her palm was red and sore. When she stopped, there was a buzzing silence, broken only by the sounds of her sobbing.



She heard a truck winding down the road. It was going very fast. Through the leaves, she could see its lights speeding along like disembodied cutouts.

“Travis?”

Then she heard that awful sound—that sound that would stay with her as long as she continued to breath: metal against metal, whining engines, screeching tires . . . a scream.

Then it was very still; she could hear steam escaping from a burst radiator hose and the coughing of an engine as it sputtered and died.

“Travis! Travis! Travis!”

Her screams resounded in her mind. They would never go away.



Carol cried freely. She didn't even try to hold back. She felt no reason to be strong any longer; some drunken bastard making a late-night run with his pulp truck had taken all reason away. She could see their wedding gifts all over the road—broken, smashed. Travis, he . . .

She opened her eyes. Some memories were just too painful to relive.

For an hour Carol sat in her car, thinking, wishing things could be different.

“You said you'd never leave me, Travis,” she sobbed. “You promised. You *promised.*”

Her sobs turned steadier.

“I don't think I can make it without you. I'd give anything to have you back, to hold you, to touch you again . . .”

The sun went behind a bank of clouds and a light breeze blew through the open window. There was now a chill in the air.

Carol thought of the dream she'd had last night. It had been a good dream, the kind of dream where you wake up wishing it had been real, the kind of dream that felt like it was *real*.



Travis had come back to her, standing outside her bedroom window, speaking through the glass: It had all been a big mistake, he had explained; he wasn't supposed to die. He was too young. He'd just gotten married for Christ's sake—they'd given him another chance.

She had gone to the window, trying to open the frosty pane, but her hands wouldn't work. She couldn't slip the catch, couldn't reach out and touch him . . .

Then the scene had switched and the two of them were curled up together on the living room couch, warmly wrapped in a quilt from the bed. It was late at night and *Letterman* was on. The glow of the TV flickered on their faces. She could feel the familiar angles of Travis's body snuggled next to her.

“I love you,” she had whispered. “Promise me you'll never leave me.”

“I promise,” Travis had replied, and she had turned to kiss him, to tell him how much she loved him—but he was gone.



“I love you Travis.”

Carol leaned her head so she could look out the car window and up at the sky, searching the cloud swept-acres. She studied the white-gray clouds. They drifted hastily, changing shape, combining with others. Some Canadian geese flew by, heading south in their instinctive, arrowhead flocks. Just above the horizon, she spied the shiny hull of a jet and the long, white plume of exhaust trailing behind. For an instant she seemed to forget. Everything seemed okay.

"I've an appointment to keep," she whispered, taking a deep breath and choking back her tears. "I promised myself I'd try. It's been more than two months."

She slipped the keys into the ignition, started the car, and backed away from the stream onto the roadway. She drove another half-mile and stopped the car on the shoulder of the road.

Ahead, Carol could see a tall, black, rod-iron fence. There was a gate in the middle and she parked in front of it. Above the opening, rusted iron letters spelled out *EAST JAY CEMETERY*.

Her hands trembled as she opened the car door. Despite her heavy knit sweater, goose-bumps crept up her arm. She swung the door shut quietly and walked around the front of the *Civic* towards the gate. Her shoes made tracks in the loose sand on the edge of the road.

Carol stared at the gate. It was swung inward, down a gentle, grassy slope. The bottom had gouged the earth where it touched. Reluctantly, she took one step forward, then another. Dew-covered grass spotted her white sneakers.

Just inside the entrance, she paused and listened as some crickets fiddled in a nearby field. Autumn-baked leaves fell in a swirl around her, scraping against the grave stones. Every sound seemed infinitely loud; she could hear the blood pounding in her ears.

A chipmunk perched atop a small, square monument screeched as Carol came near. She jumped, then tried to imitate its cry. The little animal tilted its head to listen, and then twitched its tail several times before scooting off to some unknown hole. Carol giggled and closed her eyes. She bit hard on her lower lip as tears ran down her cheeks.

She turned down an alley between several stones and stopped at a small plot near the edge of the cemetery. The limbs of a large hemlock draped lazily overhead—like a giant umbrella—and an old stone wall ran past the tree, disappearing into the undergrowth of the nearby woods.

Carol inched her way towards a shiny, new head stone. At her feet, the reworked earth was still soft and brown, and the grass around the edges of the narrow rectangle was burnt and dead. Mud had splattered the bottom of the grave marker. Carol went to her knees and wiped the dirt away with her fingers.

The monument felt cold. She lifted her head and stared blankly at the name inscribed on the glossy marble. With her fingers, she traced the letters; her wedding band grating noisily on the inscriptions' rough edges:

T - R - A - V - I - S - W - O - O - D

She leaned forward, letting her forehead rest against the inscribed date below his name. Her tears streaked the stone; her shoulders heaved . . . she sobbed quietly.

Why Travis? She asked herself. *We did everything just like we were supposed to. We didn't get married until after we finished school. We waited until we both had jobs. What did we do wrong?*

A red squirrel started to chatter in the tree above her.

"I love you so much. I don't see how I can go on. Everything seems so empty. We had so many plans."

The sun disappeared in the clouds. A frosty breeze whistled around the stones, through the trees, rustled her hair.

"We were going to have a family . . ."

Carol felt the weight of footsteps behind her. For a moment, she thought of Travis, but reality set in. She realized it could not be him. She tensed, trying to shake the tears from her eyes.

"Who's there?"

A hand touched her shoulder, squeezed, and then let go. It felt . . . familiar.

"Carol?"

She whirled.

Her mouth fell open. She wanted to scream.

"Oh my God."

Travis tried to smile, but where the mortician had sewed his mouth back together the stitches had torn through, leaving his shattered jaw dangling on the end of taut, fleshy strips. His eyes were blank whites and his skin was a sickly gray-purple color.

"I told you I'd never leave," he gurgled. "*I promised.*"

Carol stumbled backwards, her knees buckling. The headstone blocked her escape.

"This can't be happening. It's just a dream. Go away," she whimpered. "Please, go away."

Travis was still dressed in the dark blue burial suit and the bright red tie that had both been his Dad's. Where the suit had been a few sizes too big for Travis at the funeral, his bloated appendages now amply filled the legs and sleeves.

Carol began to cry.

“Don't,” Travis said.

There was mud in his hair and clothing; he smelled rotten

“Don't cry, honey. I'm back now and nothing can ever separate us again.”

He reached for her with long ashen fingers, trying to stroke away her tears. His motion was stiff, uncoordinated.

“I'm sorry, honey. So sorry this all happened . . .”

He held out his arms, inviting her embrace. The tips of his fingers were cracked, bony nubs.

“I am so cold, Carol. I need you to hold me, to make me warm, like you used to . . . *before*.”

“Don't touch me!” She shrieked.

His hands smelled putrid.

“Don't ever touch me again.”

“You used to like it when I touched you,” he said. “We used to make love, remember?”

“Y-y-yes,” she sobbed, covering her mouth with her hand, trying not to gag. Her mind flashed to the last time she and Travis had been together. She could still smell the *British Sterling* cologne he always used as after shave.

“We can be like that again.”

He moved closer, lurching on what was left of his crushed right leg.

“Please go away,” she said. “I don't know how this is possible, but please go away.”

“I'll be with you always.”

“No.”

“We're husband and wife.”

He held out a festering, claw-like hand.

“Take it . . .”

“No, please,” she pleaded. “This can't be real. I must be dreaming.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head. She pictured Travis as he had been—tall, slender, with dark brown hair and a fresh, boyish face.

When I open my eyes, she thought, he'll be gone. I'll be staring at empty space. This is all just a bad dream . . .

She winked her eyes open.

White hollows that once had been Travis's baby-blues, met hers. A purple, jelly-like substance bubbled in the corners as trapped gas leaked from behind his vacant orbs. Travis dragged the back of his right hand coarsely across the torn flesh of his face. Bits of skin and meat rolled and flaked under its weight.

"Some day, you'll learn to touch me again," he said.

"No, never."

"I will be your shadow."

"No."

He stumbled closer. His puffy, gray hands grasped her elbows with a touch that was deathly cold, unfeeling.

"I love you," he hissed, leaning to kiss her with a swollen black tongue that darted stiffly toward her mouth.

"No!" She screamed and ran off between the stones.

Her shadow followed.