

The Clutching

Rich Glinnen

Tom's brand-new Nissan was equipped with many modern features—most of which he deemed unnecessary. The Bluetooth did keep him from having to fenagle with his phone when a call came in. And the rearview camera was useful while parking. But his expertise behind the wheel kept him from justifying the need for the impact sensor. It was the Nissan's way of alerting the driver he was too close to the car in front of him by way of sudden and abominable beeping.

“Oh, shut up, I wasn't even that close,” he objected to a string of beeps. A tractor trailer had merged in front of Tom without warning, but being a seasoned driver with over 40 years' experience, he sensed that it would and—whether the Nissan knew it or not—provided ample room for it.

After another late-night Tom was sharing the road with only the dollops of light spilled onto the highway from above. It was nearly midnight and he wasn't surprised how dead it was. That particular stretch of highway traced the border of an industrial park and was only utilized during the tides of rush hour.

As Tom's vehicle entered the shadow of an oncoming overpass it decided to start in with the beeping. It was a single series of three quick beeps.

“Oh, get lost, will ya? There's nobody there.”

Tom drove home in silence.

Tom arrived to a dark house. He eased the front door open and saw a pair of flickering orbs from the far side of the living room. The longer Tom stared the more his eyes got used to the darkness, and eventually a cat's face took shape around the glowing.

Tom and his wife, Amy, bought Tux from a Persian cat breeder in Tuxedo Park. Tux was a girl, who had a tuft of black here or there, but only because her coat was tortoise shell. Her misleading moniker was chosen purely because of the breeder's location. It was Amy's idea—not Tom's. Tom didn't like “Tux”; it was a boy's name and the cat wasn't black. Tom didn't even want a cat. And definitely not a cat that cost a thousand dollars. He wanted a dog. North Shore was lousy with them and they were all a hundred bucks.

But Amy got her way. And now Tux was the only one greeting him; the only one excited to see him. Tux, the fluff ball with legs, who jogged through the darkness and up to Tom. Her orange eyes peered at her dad in cat kisses; her back rounded into a hump while she tip-toed around his feet.

Tom's flabby malaise was pierced with buzzing joy; how suddenly elated he was that they got Tux. His knees cracked as he crouched down to scratch her chin. She steered her pleased head from side to side, angling it to where the feel-good rubbing was. Tux's coloring and eyes were her star qualities. It was believed the judges at the regional cat show would agree, which is why they were scheduled to haul her off to one in a week. It was Amy's idea—not

Tom's. But on this night, during which he would usually have given Tux a requisite pat and collapse upon the bed beside Amy, he instead felt exhilarated through the newfound adoration he felt for Tux. Tux, who was completely silent except for the soothing murmur of gentle cooing; Tux, who was here because of him...

He whispered baby talk while running his fingers through her coat, focusing on the base of the tail because she liked that the best. As he got her purring to a high rev, he felt supremely content with his little life and all the beautiful things he's surrounded himself with, including Tux.

"So happy I thought of getting you," a voice said that lifelessly floated from Tom's mouth. Tux chirped, perked up at the foreign person sounding before her. Her orange eyes roundly searched the darkness for who was there. Tom no longer thought of Tux or the sanctity of the dark kitchen they were in—just the overpass he drove through and that beeping.

"All my idea. Mine."

Wadsworth heard the racket steadily approaching from behind but panic still caused him to pull the reins when it zipped through them. Rufus and Red reared and stopped under the overpass. The clicks from their landing hooves echoed through the dewy chill.

The horses were award-winning thoroughbreds who ate more vegetation in a month than most families' gardens could yield in a year. They were the Stanley's prized possessions, and paid Wadsworth a hefty salary to get as much speed as was possible out of those legs.

The pair turned out to be the fastest beasts Wadsworth had ever seen. He marveled at their power while brushing them, warmed with reward at the chiseled athleticism they've come to display, felt proud of the healthy coats that glowed like amber. Being around those animals gave him a buzz unlike any kind of drunk he's ever acquired. In fact, the Stanley's demanding nature called for a packed conditioning schedule for their latest investment. Therefore, Wadsworth didn't have much time to drink, nor the hours in the morning to overcome the leeching effects of a hangover. He soon appreciated the mornings and became a sort of early bird—not just because he had to anymore, but because he didn't like sleeping the day away. Rufus and Red were ideal companions during the serene dawn, when the Stanley's and all the rest of their employ were still in bed and the ranch's heartbeat drummed throughout the ranch by way of galloping hooves.

"You're a miracle worker, Wad. They're the fastest beasts I've ever seen," marveled Mr. Stanley. He stood beside his wife, and from where Wadsworth sat high up on his horse, he had a heartbreaking angle of Mrs. Stanley's cleavage, round and freckled and no doubt slicked with sweat.

"We'll have a one-two finish at the Stakes for sure," mouthed Mrs. Stanley. How Wadsworth wanted to make her sing.

That night Wadsworth, blood rich with compliments and lust, thought nothing wrong with a celebratory nightcap. He uncorked a bottle and got comfortable upon a bale of hay in the stalls. That way, if he were to feel crummy the next morning, he wouldn't have to go far to be right where he needed to be.

It didn't take long for Wadsworth to get smart and quit wasting so many minutes of his life waiting to be happy. He was happy when tending to Rufus and Red, but he was happiest when bending an arm.

Performing his duties while stoned came to be getting the most out of life.

"That feels awfully nice, Wad. Sure calms a boy down before a race," Red said, blinking slowly as Wadsworth ran a brush down his snout. Red only spoke when Wadsworth was drinking.

Wad's cheeks filled with a burp. He exhaled and smiled. His ex-wife didn't like him drinking—thought it made him a bit of a loon. At first she thought whenever her husband was drunk he would like to clean, for whenever she awoke at daybreak Wadsworth would be lying on the floor in the kitchen with a broom beside him. It wasn't until one tumultuous night that she woke up to her husband hollering. As the initial shock dissipated, she was able to make out from the bedroom her husband reciting the very same conversation they had had that afternoon:

"I don't know what the big deal is—I get all my chorin' done. A man's allowed to have a long drink after a long day."

She crept slowly to the kitchen.

"I know, I know," Wadsworth said after a bit of silence, like a man who'd been apologized to.

She saw her husband waltzing with the broom in a lazy circle, his face buried in its brush. A gasp escaped her and alerted Wadsworth to her presence, but he didn't abandon his paramour—he gripped her in his arms and angled her away from his peering wife.

"She's mine! All mine!"

Were the Stanley's light sleepers, they would've witnessed Rufus and Red's only race. They were by far the fastest amongst the pack that bucked through the night-washed woods hours before the inaugural Belmont Stakes, outrunning the law and all their hollering and threats. Even though they had to haul their bloated trainer in a cumbersome buggy, they were still mere shadows in the sheriff's eyes. Gradually the dots got smaller and smaller, to the point that the gang couldn't even make out Wad's frantic and inaccurate whipping.

"I'll get a wire out tonight. That idiot won't get far."

Wadsworth found himself lost in Wyoming, drunk and cackling. Rufus was also talkative when his trainer was drunk. "I'm tired," he sighed.

"Yeah, yeah, I get my chorin' done..."

Red caught a side eye from Rufus and knew his pleading for rest was an understatement. "I think we should hold up in the shade for a bit, Wad. I'm sure ain't nobody knows where we are."

But Wadsworth didn't move. Wadsworth didn't respond. Wadsworth just burped.

Rufus and Red wound up keeling over in Jackson. A hard hand and chiseled jaw made Wadsworth aware of this tragedy—he had fallen asleep and had no idea they stopped moving.

“Oh Lord,” Wadsworth whispered. But the chiseled jaw belonged to the law, and the trainer was shot right there with the reins still in his hands.

Tom traced around cars on the highway like they were standing still. But even with the economy mode switched off the Nissan couldn't outrun the helicopter's spotlight. The drivers reluctantly caught in this highspeed chase watched a desperate man hunched over the wheel, clenching his teeth and shouting at his windshield.

He shouted because the impact sensor wouldn't stop beeping, which, Tom assumed, was the thing distressing Tux. In reality, Tux was distressed because Tom wouldn't stop shouting. But that's not what Tom heard:

“This beeping is ridiculous. You know what you're doing,” Tom heard Tux quiver, erect in her carrying case.

Tom switched lanes, grumbling and rumbling. “I was thinking the same thing.”

“I don't think Mom is going to be happy with you.”

“I don't think so either,” he mumbled, trying to ignore the clanging from above. The glaring spotlight of the helicopter sucked up any smidgen of shadow inside the car. Tom was spotted with sweat. But he felt alive. Every moment that passed was precious, since he knew he wouldn't have many moments left. He gulped them like a drunk. Once the helicopter was on you, you were caught forever.

“I think you should pull over,” Tux piped innocently, “you look like you're getting tired.”

It seemed as if this cat was reading his mind. Tired wasn't the word for it. He was clutched by something.

A gas station was coming up that Tom was familiar with. It was a Stewart's and he felt like a shake. He put the blinker on and took the next exit. Tom imagined Tux relieved that it appeared he was listening to him.

He found a spot near the door and ignored the people in the parking lot gaping at his light-drenched car, ignored the deafening helicopter bending trees and scattering trash all around, ignored the parade of screaming police cruisers piling into the parking lot.

“I'll be right back, Tux,” Tom said, turning off the Nissan.

As he got out Tom continued his blazing ignorance of the situation he was in—the guttural vows of bloodshed from the officers who were now outside their vehicles, the fact that the ice cream counter inside Stewart's had been closed for hours.

“Amy,” Tom asked his wife hogtied upon the Nissan's roof, “did you want anything?”

Amy's wild eyes searched for her husband. "What has gotten into you?" they seemed to ask.

A swirl of navy collided with Tom's pear-shaped countenance and pinned him to the pavement.

"She's mine," Tom savagely boomed under the press of a precinct of police, "she's all mine!"

Author Bio:

Rich Glinnen is a market researcher by day and a writer by night. He enjoys bowling, and eating gruyere with his cats at his home in Bayside, NY. He was nominated for the 2017 Best of the Net Anthology. His work can be read in Kenneth Warren's *Lakewood House Organ*. His wife calls him Taco.