

The Veil
by Martin Rose

Trevor tore the boutonniere from his lapel. He crushed the rose in his hand, and the pin pierced the webbing of his thumb and forefinger.

Where is she?

Trevor stared at his car; bent tin cans affixed to the bumper, dangled on wet pavement, resonating in the wind like knives on a chalkboard. Blood dripped from his fingers as he released the bloom, petals floating on the wind. The diner beyond him glared pink with neon lights, illuminating the writing on his back windshield: *Just Married*.

He waited at the car for over an hour, believing any moment he would see his bride, eating a piece of Derby pie all this time. But no such thing happened -- and he stared at the empty car, expecting Justine to appear in the passenger seat with a smile and a wave, *I was here all along, Trevor, didn't you see me? Don't be a silly; we'll be late for check in at the cabin!*

Glass ground beneath his heels. He opened the driver's door and sat back into the seat, closing his eyes. Numb, he pulled his cell phone from his pocket and stared at it.

How do you tell the police you lost your bride? How do you tell them you lost your wife? How do you tell them you lost a woman in a white dress at a sleazy, truck stop diner? How do you explain to them that she disappeared into thin air?

How do you tell them you failed?

He put the cell phone away. The answer was simple.

You don't tell them.

Panic, hysteria, disbelief.

Tears came next, though he would tell no one how he cried into the dashboard, swallowing the last sob with a strangled choke. Hysterics over with, he moved onto the next stage: Denial.

Trevor worried at his wedding band, the pale gold, fresh minted in the waning sunlight. How had he offended the gods? Was he not pious enough, not cut from the right religious cloth? *This is all because I'm not a virgin.*

He groaned and stared at the empty passenger seat beside him.

Her veil remained where she had left it, pulling it from her dark ringlets. She smelled like rain and lavender. The perfume lingered, caught in the gauzy material, deflated and shrunken now -- wedding veil become funeral shroud.

She's in the bathroom, or maybe she's planning a surprise for me -- you know she likes to shop, maybe she tracked down that outlet store she likes to waste her money at.

He pulled the veil from the seat. The material was stiff in his fingers, and he held it to his face, breathing in Justine's scent, the funny girl he met in his chemistry class, the girl he promised he would love and cherish until death. He held it to his face, but all he could see behind his closed eyes was her naked body, bruised and stabbed and raped, at the bottom of a muddy ditch.

She wasn't at the bottom of a muddy ditch.

He dreamed. In the front seat of the *Just Married* Ford Taurus, he turned and his mouth worked, the hot skin of his forehead touching the glass of the window. Ninety degrees and counting.

Unconscious, he saw her as an observer, still dressed in his tuxedo, the cummerbund a red open wound across his belly. She opened the door and stood, watching the skyline with a smile, hands on her waist, the white gown unfolding in layers of satin.

Justine turned at the sound of a purring motor, the veil in her hand trailing in the wind. A Mustang pulled up along side the Taurus, an expensive car beside a modest one, illustrating the contrast in their finances and class. Her mouth curled into a smile -- Justine's first love had always been a Mustang. A stranger in a suit stepped out, stretching his legs onto the pavement.

Trevor's hands felt cold and clammy as he watched them engage in conversation; this older, balding man, who admired her behind his horn-rimmed eye glasses. He motioned to the car like a show man, the detail, the chrome gauges glimmering in the half-light of the sunset. His teeth, mismatched and crooked as tombstones, gleamed as she leaned down to look inside.

Justine, Justine.

He could say nothing, helpless to watch as the stranger led her like a dancer around the car, pausing at the trunk. Trevor's pulse quickened and he cried out, but Justine's story continued to unfold without him. He could only rant and rave, like a man in a theater, where the picture show goes on with or without his participation.

The stranger gestured toward his open trunk, and she bent at her little waist, enclosed in white ribbon. He clubbed her across the back of her head with flashlight. The glass popped and the bulb shattered, a dollop of blood flying through the air. Her fingers loosed and the veil dropped onto the dirty roadway, but the stranger caught her with a practiced motion, as though swooning ladies were a specialty of his. He grinned behind his

row of broken teeth and quickly pulled a box from the trunk.

Justine still breathed, her lungs heaving beneath her bridal corset. Her ruby lips were clamped shut with a swatch of duct tape, his dirty fingers lingering over her face, her mouth. He turned his attention to the bungee cords, wrapping her wrists in an intricate series of knots. Her eyes fluttered, but did not open. The man paused, looking about him like a fox catching the scent of an intruder, staring at Trevor with startling intensity, as though he could see him.

Trevor turned toward the diner -- and there he was! Dream Trevor watching himself paying his check at the diner, his back turned on his kidnapped wife, waiting as the hostess counted out his change, each penny a second lost to fate, each dollar she peeled into his hand, an eternity lost.

Trevor turned to find the Mustang pulling from the lot, exhaust fumes clinging to the ground like a mist as it circled the Taurus. In seconds, the car was one among many in the flood of highway traffic.

Justine was gone. The veil fluttered by the Taurus, flecked with blood and mud.

"Trevor."

He jerked awake. The veil lay draped across his face, tickling his skin like spider webs. He pulled it off with a shudder. *This was the last thing she wore. That man took her, and this is all I have left . . .*

He frowned and clenched the veil between his fingers.

"Trevor!"

He jumped, and this time the voice registered as real, a fragment of his dream life

bleeding into reality. But there was no one there, and the voice did not speak again.

He worried at the fabric with his fingers, fighting the outrageous impression that the veil was all that remained of her.

Was it so incredible that the veil, stained with her blood, could hold a tenuous thread between himself and his bride? He held it up, pulling it over his face. He breathed in the scent of exhaust, rain, perfume and oil slick; became enveloped in the --

blackness. There's nothing but blackness inside this trunk, and she holds herself still and tiny, lips pressed against the duct tape. She shivers, rustling crinoline and lace. He can hear her voice in the back of her throat, saying his name, over and over, a prayer for a god to deliver her from the nightmare. She smells rubber from the spare tire her head rests against, her mascara running. Justine is afraid to vomit, and choke on it, choke on the --

scent.

He threw the veil. It fluttered into the passenger seat, and he regarded it with lips drawn back from his teeth. The veil reminded him of greasy plastic wrap, of dead animal skins, of the rotting marsh at low tide.

Trevor jammed the key into the ignition and the engine roared into life.

"I'm coming, Justine. I'm coming. Just tell me where you are -- that's all you have to do."

He turned the wheel and reached for the veil. With a labored breath, he drew it across his --

eyes, her eyes are open in the darkness, where the new car smell lingers in the fetid air, and it is woefully hot in the enclosed space. Her head hurts and from far away she hears the faint sound of a voice she knows. The message filters in like a radio frequency.

. . . tell me where you are -- that's all you have to do.

She shudders; she knows the voice of her groom. Her tongue is mashed against her teeth, dry and cracked as a piece of leather. Her head aches where the skin split at the base of her skull. Blood pools through the fabric; the back of her white dress is splattered with it.

He was going south. It's so hot in here, Trevor.

I'm coming. Hold on.

Trevor gripped the veil in his thin fingers as the car purred through highway traffic, his eyes picking out every car, searching for the Mustang. He pressed the pedal against the floor. He had squandered precious time, and now he struggled to make up for it. Cars flashed past his window: trucks, hatch backs with college kids and sport utility vehicles with soccer moms.

With a car like that? No, no -- he wants a nice ride, only highway miles for his pony -- no bumpy, backwater roads for him, no. I'll find him. I have to find him.

What if he turned off? It's been awhile. He could have taken one of the secondary roads. He swallowed his doubt with bitter determination, and continued on.

The ride lasted an eternity.

Trevor allowed his thoughts to drift, a last ditch effort to preserve his sanity. The veil lay in his lap, trailing onto the steering wheel where he gripped it with white knuckles. The sun beat at full strength, and he felt the beads of sweat collecting at the base of his neck. How hot was it for her, in that trunk? He no longer feared her murder so much as he feared she would be baked alive, like a roasted potato. Each touch of the veil--

I'm thirsty, Trevor.

-- conveyed a smothering sense of heat, a pressure on her chest that made it hard to breathe with her mouth clamped shut.

Oh, if only he would stop, he prayed.

But the man had not stopped. Trevor could feel it in the veil, feel it through Justine's sense of motion sickness, the constant rocking of the car as it paced through traffic.

His eyes burned with strain, the lids heavy. With a sinking heart, he signaled the turn as he pulled off to the shoulder. He could not continue at his breakneck pace -- and it would do her no good to cause an accident. An hour nap, he promised himself, regarding the veil with suspicion before pulling it over his face and closing his eyes.

Somewhere in the night, Justine stops; but it is more than the car that comes to a halt. Perhaps the blood loss has been too great, leaking from her skull with a steady, relentless flow; or the heat in her terrible blackness that crushes and sucks at her, making each breath a labor, each heart beat an impossible task. Delirium sets in. She sees her wedding day, played over and over again; her bride groom bending before her with a kiss and her lips upturned to receive it.

She dies with a single exhalation.

Trevor jerked upright in the darkness of the car, and for a moment, his vision doubled. It was *himself* trapped in the trunk gasping like a fish in the darkness; it was *his* death rattle he heard in his throat, reverberating against metal and glass.

The moment passed, and he was wholly, utterly alone. The veil remained an empty, thrumming phone line, an open connection with no one at the end of it. She had been cut away from him and he gushed blood in her absence. Crushed and broken, he clenched the veil between his fingers. The sensation of that car -- and by association, the stranger -- widened and expanded.

He started the engine, muttering to himself. Trevor could not grieve. Nothing but the veil remained, pushing him onward, a thin white thread. *Find her.*

Even if she was already dead.

He teased the engine past the 60 mph mark. The car shuddered as he pressed it past 70, into the 80 mph range. The road surface made a syncopated thump beneath the passage of the tires. The sound reminded him of a heart beat.

For a time, there were no thoughts, no considerations. The pull of the veil was magnetic, a compass pointing relentlessly north. He could feel the fabric tremble when the Taurus veered off course, reminding him with terrible omniscience *No, this way*, until he corrected his steering.

Past exit 36, the veil moved like a snake beneath his fingers, writhing with muscular strength. Horrified and disgusted, he jerked his hand away and wrenched the steering wheel to the left, missing the car in the lane beside him, forcing himself back into a straight line.

Up ahead loomed a rest stop, its cracked pavement bristling with highway weeds and wild flowers that smelled of diesel fumes and hot tar. A few cars peppered the landscape, but only one -- new, sleek and expensive -- stood out among the rest.

Trevor's reaction was immediate. He jerked the wheel to the right and floored the gas pedal, rocketing across four lanes of traffic. Cars veered, their tires screaming and screeching behind him, spinning into accidents they sought to avoid. He tore through the flimsy metal guard rail, tearing up swaths of earth beneath his hungry tires as he approached the entrance to the rest stop.

The man stood by the car, admiring the painted surface as he caressed it with one hand, the touch of a lover.

The stranger turned. Coffee steamed in his hand, his eyes widening as he confronted the Taurus careening toward him like an ancient dinosaur emerging from the earth, the grill a set of jaws opening wide to receive him. The stranger had time to blink, and then the Taurus split his body in two. His entrails extended like a lasso, legs akimbo, and the stinking smell of spilled coffee and blood permeating the air.

The stranger groaned. He heard the engine rattle, then die; a door slamming closed, approaching footsteps across the broken black top. He met Trevor's eyes, but his vision was fading, filling with gray. He expired in a confusion of thoughts, his last concern for the pristine condition of his Mustang.

Trevor kicked dirt into the man's open eyes, his mouth a flat line of rage, and walked to the open door of the Mustang. The cool, leather interior urged him to settle in, to stay a little longer as he pulled the key from the ignition and popped the trunk. Sirens reverberated in the distance as he worried his wedding ring with relentless fingers, the metal cutting a line into the flesh.

He lifted the trunk, the grating squeal of metal hinges piercing his ears.

The trunk was empty.

Trevor stared into the empty space, unable to reconcile what he felt with what was not there.

He swayed, the breeze cooling sweat on his forehead. His mind raced with a thousand thoughts, impressions, and threads of wailing reason. Delirious in his fury, he had pursued his purpose with gut instinct alone. Now, instinct failed him, and reason pushed forward to explain away the impossible. He clutched at the veil, like captured smoke in his hands. It clung to his fingers, insistent.

Wooden, he turned and approached the Taurus, each step heavier than the last, his tread like stone, each footfall a regret. He gritted his teeth, biting into the skin of his cheek, and his hands shook as he brought forth his car key. On the second try, he jammed the key into the lock and popped the trunk open.

Justine.

Her mouth bound in silver duct tape, like her hands and feet. She lay curled like a child playing dress up for her wedding day. He regarded the body a long moment -- she had always been with him, hadn't she? As close as a breath away. He might have stopped at any point and opened the trunk. Was this the heart of the joke, what the stranger wanted? To kill her while she lay just five feet from her groom?

Trevor dropped his keys into the dust, the trunk lid creaking in the wind as he stepped away, a moan escaping his lips. He dropped the veil, and it floated on the wind like a dandelion wisp, over the black top, past the wreckage of the cars, and onto the highway beyond.

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First published in *The Monsters Next Door: Road Trip*, November 2009

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