

Hard to Live, Easy to Die
by Jeremy Damato

In a yellow tollbooth, motionless on a rapid way of automobiles, Edward Brown collected tolls for seventeen years.

Late night to early morning, he worked the first shift. Seated on an uncomfortable four-legged stool, wearing a polyester jacket with a mesh safety vest. He thumbed through his black money tray, a two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar bank of fifty singles, fifteen five's and ten ten-dollar bills. Validating vehicle classes on his MLT screen.

The highway after dark dealt a deck of broken hearts that bemoaned their woes at the turnpike. Into the small hours as bars and clubs closed. Lonely and disheartened would come and go across Edwards eyes. Moving with the same sadness, grieving the same desperate way. Mistaking his small-enclosed booth for a confessional to absolve their transgressions. Edward mused over a young woman who had an abortion haunted by guilt and remorse; a prostitute who tearfully told him she could find no other employment to support her two-year old son; and a businessman besieged with debt.

A dirty grim Oldsmobile 98' pulled out of the toll lane and grumbled off. The 98's parting words Edward muttered under his breath.

“It's harder to live, easier to die.”

He weighed the words carefully.

At dawn, a violet sky of indigo spanned a waking yawn. Darkness echoed off in the west where the moon slowly and faintly set. A ribbon of light crowned the eastern sky. Edward looked on into the night tide fading feeling tired and spent. The sun made his own pain all the brighter,

harsher, more troubling. It shone in on his sadness and loneliness. Feeling completely helpless, denude of all poor diversions. He thought of what to have for breakfast only to feel pitiful and hopeless. In the morning sunshine burned a sinister horror, an awful realization that joy never existed naturally in his heart. Moments of happiness were always pushed close to the point of pain. Disquiet seeped into his belly. Languishing in a deep valley of slow and lingering despair, he exhaled a long useless sigh over his lot in life. Logged off his MLT screen. Jadedly took his moneybag and cash drawer and made the switch with the next toll collector.

In a duplex house, trackside in a railroad town, Edward sat at his kitchen table absorbed in thought. A cigarette burning between his fingers, white walls brown as resin from the smoke. A soft murmur of winter blew through the window, rattling the dusty yellowed blinds. Over a period of thirty-two years carelessness undermined his marriage, like an open window that lets the rain in. Respect morphed into disdain, trust-doubt, and praise-blame. What Edward needed from others, far more than anything, was love and attention? As a husband and father, he received neither. In mindless literature and television, his wife Darlene was complacent, unaware of her involvement with the hurting of Edwards's heart. Heedless to the painful subtleties of her actions, she was only attentive to the wrong messages sent to her, inciting her insecurities. Living in a pretense of a marriage. Edward had committed himself to meeting his responsibilities solely for the sake of their son Joshua.

In the guest room, daytime shone through a dirty skylight onto Edwards unmade bed. With the smell of currency still on his hands, he pulled the rumpled sheets from the bottom of the mattress

over his head. Little by little, lush, libidinous details of an erotic dancer, who at his traffic gate lifted her shirt to show him her large breasts, stirred within him.

“These could be yours,” she said.

Edward knew that it was only about her, searching for attention, a reaction. Still lust consumed him. Panging for release, he tossed and turned until the tension was too much to ignore.

Dennis Wilsons *Pacific Ocean Blue* spun on Edwards’s turntable, the needle surfing across waves of heartache. Edward was always listening to music, if he wasn’t listening; he was buying and collecting more. Music was his escape, his idol sanctuary and treasured friend. In radiant streams of intuition, close were his passions and deepest yearnings. Close was the solution that transcended his loneliness and fear. Close, but only fleeting and vanishing evocations. Disappearing when the music was over. Recommencing a dark guttural cry that only another song could silence and transfigure. Music at its best was the only truth Edward could sense.

With a clean dry cloth Edward methodically wiped-off a stack of jeweled CD cases and DVD keep cases, sorting them into different boxes. Unusually proficient in the preparation and packing of a box, Edward had decided to compose a magnum opus of perfection, encapsulating the profundity of his music & film collection. Labeled by genre and enclosed with a register of every title contained, listed in alphabetical order, handwritten on a legal pad of paper. It was to be for his son Joshua, of whom he invested all his faith and love so he would have a timeless friend, a confluence of sounds to escape to.

In his bedroom, Joshua reread the same sentence in his book again and again, while the

monstrous blare of an overused vacuum cleaner resonated exasperatingly. As shreds of lint clung to the carpet and dust overlay the furniture and hardwood floor, Edward compulsively vacuumed his album jackets, firmly grasping the brush nozzle as he swept.

Joshua's love for his father was contradictory. The power to say, "I love you" eluded him, perhaps because he saw such complexity in those three words. He was impatient with Edwards's failings and scornful of his self-pity. Music was their language and they hardly ever spoke about anything else. Arrogant and ungrateful, Joshua wrestled with what was innate and what was instilled. It was Edwards's longings and dreams that had shaped Joshua's identity and driven his talents to develop. However, his pride and will to be an individual compelled him to renounce Edwards's influence and take all recognition.

On a Tuesday morning, when the faint graceful arc of the moon and the morning star were visible in the blue sky far, far in the distance. The sun shined through the spoked grilles of the oval window in Edwards's dining room, shedding its profile on the adjacent wall. In the midst of the light Edward busied over his last succession of boxes, meticulously organizing and reorganizing until the right arrangement was in place. Upon completion Edward asked Joshua to help him seal the last remaining box. Joshua refused and openly turned against his father, forsaking the ties that bonded their relationship. He forcibly declared his hatred and contempt in Edwards's face, who stood there, broken and rejected as he allowed his son to command and disrespect him.

"Seal your own box," he shouted. I want no part of it."

Joshua remained unfriendly and sulky, when he proved arrogant and defiant. No happiness and peace had come to Edward, no closure, only the sorrow and trouble of unrequited love. When lethargy permeated his motivation. Edward discerned only the western horizon at its most sunken and sunless hour, when forms and things were indistinct and colors died away. Dust began to veil every box. More commodities accumulated, till dust pervaded them and so the routine went as it had always gone. Until after his shift one morning when everything was quiet and still, Edward set off for his drive-up storage unit in the gray-blue air of dawn. Opening the roll-up metal door, he exhaled a long useless sigh and muttered under his breath “it’s harder to live, easier to die,” and closed the shutter behind him.

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