

Ruhrrrr, Ruhrrrr

by Lawrence Allan

As Eric Ramirez waited at a red-light in his dented, gray Nissan, hundreds of cars sat to his right in one of the largest used car lots in SoCal, biding their time. It was 10:30ish on a slow, Saturday night in Canoga Park, California and he was stuck behind a military tanker truck as a bag of nuggets from Mickey D's cooled in his passenger seat. He was twenty three and wore his best looking Lakers jersey that got him those higher tips when hustling on food delivery apps.

He was spent, having been at it for twelve hours. The plan was to get home, get high and chow down while streaming the new action flick all his friends on Insta were raving about.

"Come on," he groaned, tapping the wheel. The smell of the nuggets were distracting.

He had picked them up after a brief stop at Mike's, his pot dealer. Sure, he could go to a dispensary and get what he needed, but then he wouldn't see Mike. All tossed blonde hair and blue eyes. And that crooked ass smile. Sometimes they'd fool around, all fun and games and good times, but when it was over, Eric would go, leaving a bit of himself behind. And he hated it. But he couldn't bring himself to say he wanted more. He was scared Mike wouldn't feel the same.

The light turned green.

He sighed, took his foot off the brake and shifted his eyes from the tanker to his phone.

The song playing just wasn't going to do—

CRUNCH.

Eric slammed his brakes, closed his eyes, fearing the worst. He didn't need another car accident. He couldn't afford it. He opened an eye and breathed easy. He hadn't hit anything.

It had been a motorcycle. The rear wheel of the bike stuck out from the underbelly of the tanker, just behind the front wheels.

“Oh, shit.” Eric licked his lips and wondered if the guy was OK. Must've been trying to run a red. He reached over and touched the nuggets. They were still warm, but it looked like they would have to wait.

A young soldier hopped down out of the cab of the truck to see what happened.

Eric strained to see more, to see what the soldier could see.

After peering under the tanker, the soldier stood up and looked wide eyed at Eric, as if trying to telepathically communicate the gravity of the situation. Not waiting to see if the message was received, he turned on his boots and ran down the street as fast as he could.

Eric felt his stomach drop. “What the...?” He looked back at the tanker and the motorcycle. Because his mother had lectured him about always doing the right thing, he knew he had to get out of his car and check on the guy who crashed. He took a deep breath and let it go as he stepped out of his car.

First thing he saw was the carnival yellow gas oozing from a crack in the tanker wall caused by the motorcycle. He watched as he drifted towards the used car lot.

“What the hell happened here?” a deep voice demanded, followed by a hacking cough. The cloud obscuring the lot parted revealing a pot-bellied Black man in dirty overalls with his hands on his hips. He was fifty-five with a dusting of white in his hair. He spotted the accident. “Oh, my.” A rough hand went to his lips. “So that’s what I heard back in the shop.” After a long look, he shook his head. “He won’t be needing a band-aid.”

Eric swallowed down the bad taste that was forming in his mouth and said, “I was just about to call 911.” He thumbed behind him. “The truck driver... he just ran.”

The mechanic frowned. “He what?”

“*Ran*,” Eric repeated.

The mechanic shook his head in disbelief. He grunted. “What the hell do you think this yellow stuff is?” he asked, waving his hand in the air.

Eric shrugged and turned back to his car to grab his phone. He paused, hearing something. “What was that?”

“Huh?”

“I heard something.” Eric looked around. He was sure he heard something. “It was like a ...”

Ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrrr.

The mechanic stood straight. He heard it that time. A rumble, like thunder in the distance.

Headlights popped on in the car lot. Car by car, all shining at Eric and the mechanic.

Ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrrr. Louder now, more insistent. At the very front, a red Honda moved. Only a couple of feet. Like it was testing its wheels out.

Eric stepped back, heart beating. “What the...?”

The wheels of the Honda ground on the blacktop as they turned a few inches toward the two men.

The mechanic raised a hand and squinted into the glare of the headlights, trying to see who was in the driver's seat. He barked, "I don't know what your plan is!" He pointed. "But there are cameras everywhere, you ain't going to get away with it!"

The Honda began rolling forward as the other cars moved in fits and starts. *Ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrrr!* The car reached the chain that hung around the perimeter of the lot from short, wooden posts. As the car pushed against it, its motor pitched higher as it revved up. The wooden posts started creaking and finally — *snap* — the chain dropped to the ground and the Honda rolled out of the lot.

Closer now, the two men could finally see who was behind the wheel.

No one.

"Oh, *shit*," said Eric as he and the mechanic stepped back.

The cars poured onto the street, like marbles out of a jar, each one scattering and droning *ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrrr*. The two men kept stepping back, neither saying anything, neither understanding why it was happening. Eric realized what the soldier was trying to say. Without looking at the mechanic, he said, "Run."

"Eh?"

Eric ran.

The mechanic did the same.

Breaking hard, the Honda followed, with a Subaru Forester and a Kia joining in.

Eric ran past his car, legs pumping, not sure where he was going, just anywhere but here.

The mechanic struggled to keep up because of his bad of knees. The cars picked up speed.

The Honda knocked the older man to the pavement and he cried out.

Eric paused to look.

The Honda moved over the mechanic's legs as the Subaru and Kia slowed and turned toward them. The mechanic twisted in pain. He let out a scream that was cut short as he was pulled under the red car. The Honda shook from side to side. *Ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrrr!*

The shaking stopped.

The mechanic rose from under the dashboard, his ashen head dangling toward a shoulder, eyes completely white. His hands touched the wheel as though placed upon it.

The three cars *ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrr*'d and turned toward Eric.

With a burst of speed he didn't realize he had, Eric darted down a side street, and took the first left, down a residential street. He ducked behind a parked SUV and held his breath.

The *ruhrrrrring* got closer, louder.

He closed his eyes, hoping it would make him invisible like it did when he was a kid.

Louder. Closer. *Ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrrr!*

His lungs ached and screamed for air.

The *ruhrrrrr*'s cruised on by. He opened his eyes and gulped in air. He dared a look down the street.

Six sets of red lights moved away into the night.

A vibration. A shudder. He looked at the SUV and then pulled his hands away. Maybe it was his imagination. But, he wasn't going to take a chance. He was out of there, running to the closest place he could think of.

Five minutes later, Eric ran up the concrete steps of a forest green, two bedroom and started pounding on the front door. This was Mike's place. He had just been here, what, twenty, thirty minutes ago, a lifetime, something like that. He pounded again, hoping Mike wasn't already high and stuck in some video game. Eric glanced back down the street. Nothing. Just street lights. Homes. Cars parked out front. Totally normal.

"Mike, open up. It's me!"

He could hear Mike shuffling to the front door before he could see him. The curtain over the glass front door shifted. Mike, wearing a bathrobe over his t-shirt and shorts, looked confused. And any other night, it would be cute. "What's going on, E?" he said opening the door. "You forget something?"

Eric pushed his way inside, slammed the door closed, locked and leaned against it.

"You tripping?"

"Oh, man. If only." Eric moved to his left into the living room, kneeled on the couch at the front window and peered through the blinds.

"Dude, you're freaking me out."

Eric looked at him, eyes wide. "There's a red Honda."

Mike moved closer, a hand up. "Someone's following you, and you led them *here*?"

Eric shook his head. “No, no. Not *someone*. A car. It...” He couldn’t settle. He couldn’t focus. Suddenly, he wasn’t sure. “This car. These *cars*. They were moving on their own.” He paused. “It ate him.” The moment he said it, he wished he hadn’t.

“Ate? What are who?”

Eric licked the sweat from his upper lip. Maybe he was trippin’.

Mike slipped his hands into the robe pockets. “OK, alright.” His voice was calm, reassuring. A hint of a smile. “It’s gonna be OK, man. I’ll get you some cold water and we’ll talk you down. Whatever you’re on, maybe you’re dehydrated.” He moved through the living room and dining room into the kitchen, flicking on the light.

Eric peeked outside. Nothing. Just a street. A normal, quiet suburban street.

He sunk into the couch and balled his fists, put them against his eyes and rested his elbows on his knees. He was exhausted. Twelve hours in a car, almost every day of the week to make rent was no way to live.

Those nuggets were ice cold by now.

A hand touched his neck. Eric pulled back, opening his eyes, hands up.

Mike was on the couch, a glass of water in one hand, the other raised to rub Eric’s neck. “Sorry. You looked, uh... stressed.” He offered the water. “Drink all of it. It’ll help.”

Eric nodded and took the water. It was cool, not cold. He did just as he was told and drank all of it. Mike was right. It did help. He looked at him. Mike had a been-there-done-that smile dancing on his lips. His head nodding slightly. Eric was glad that he came back here. He had made the right choice. Everything was going to be —

Bright white lights blazed through the blinds.

Mike turned to look as Eric pushed down a blind.

The red Honda was on the front lawn with two other cars, a 90s white Mustang, a chick magnet for coke addled owners, and a gray Toyota Camry. They shuffled back and forth, revving their engines. *Ruhrrrr, ruhrrrr*. Inside the Honda, the mechanic's body wobbled as the car moved.

"What the fuck?" said Mike. "Those asshole are on my lawn." He started to go confront them.

Eric grabbed him by the arm. "Don't." Eric looked out the window. "There was this gas. It did something to the cars."

Mike looked out the window then back at Eric. "What did *what* to the cars?"

Ruhrrrr, ruhrrrr!

"Something. I don't know what!"

Mike struggled to take it all in. "Why are they making that noise? Why are they going...?"

Eric pulled Mike from the window. "We should be safe here. They're cars. They can't get up stairs."

Mike chewed a thumbnail. "Do we call the cops?" He had never called the cops for anything.

The Honda's engine roared. They looked through the window.

The car gunned it up the stairs onto the porch while the mechanic's head lashed around. It crashed into the front door, glass exploding, the door frame splintering as it came crashing down

with the car wedging into the exterior wall. Plaster and lathe crumbled as the car pushed into the house.

Eric dropped the glass, grabbed Mike and dragged him toward the kitchen.

They burst out the backdoor into the small backyard and dodged the small inflatable pool they would hang out in when they were high and drunk.

Ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrrr!

On their right, rolling up the driveway was the Mustang, with two bodies flopping in the front seats. The Camry brought up the rear.

Cut off, the guys headed to the back fence. The Mustang collided with the pool, tearing the flimsy plastic and water gushed onto the yellowing lawn. Eric and Mike grabbed the top of the wooden fence and hauled their asses up and over, falling into the neighbor's backyard.

“What the fuck?” a woman's voice shrieked.

A naked forty-something white couple who had been fucking on the grass in their yard glared at Eric and Mike. The woman, astride her husband, covered her breasts with an arm. “I'm calling the cops!”

The fence creaked and wavered.

A rumble from the other side. *Ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrrr!*

The guys backed away and the woman climbed off her husband, putting herself between him and whatever was making that noise. He sat there, frozen.

The fence broke and fell towards them with a gust of air revealing the Mustang and the Camry while the Honda struggled through the back wall of Mike's house.

The guys turned and ran as the couple scrambled backwards, trying to get to their feet. The Camry rolled right over them. A pair of screams and then nothing. They reappeared, naked and lifeless in the front seats of the car. The woman sat at the steering wheel and the man rested his head on the dashboard in the passenger seat.

The Mustang turned to Eric and Mike. *Ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrrr.*

Mike grabbed Eric and they ran across the deck into the home. They raced through a newly remodeled kitchen. The Mustang popped onto the deck and smashed the sliding glass door while they ran out the front of the house.

A few minutes later, with the crashing sounds distant and thinking they were maybe safe, Mike stopped to pick a stone out of his barefoot. He cursed a couple of times and Eric wondered how he could help. But, it didn't seem like Mike was much interested in his help, so he just tried to look sympathetic.

"We could go to my place," suggested Eric.

Mike put his foot down and inspected his other.

"It's, uh. Nice. Nothing special. It's a one bedroom. I mean, you could crash there, on the couch. That'd be cool." Eric stopped. "It's on the third floor. They can't get up there."

Mike looked at him. He wasn't so sure.

Eric pointed West. "It's just a couple blocks past Topanga." Topanga Avenue was the main drag of Canoga Park. Restaurants, bars, shops, the dull chains you'd find in the suburbs. It was always filled with cars. The not-eating-people kind.

Mike agreed to the plan. And least it was something. They walked in silence for a bit while Mike was on the look out for stones and broken glass and Eric looked for a way to break the tension. “You OK, man?” Eric hated it as soon as it came out of his mouth.

Mike said nothing,

Eric knew he should say something. Eric searched for the words. Normally, they would talk about video games or pot or the latest movie or Tik Tok making the round, something. Both had parents who didn’t get it and hounded after them to get back to school and ‘make something of their lives.’ But this moment, this terrible fucked up moment, Eric didn’t know how to fill it.

“No, Eric. I am not OK.”

Damn. Mike never called Eric by his name. It was always E.

“I liked that place. My house. I just finally got it how I really wanted it.” He shook his head. “What happens to my deposit? Is my landlord going to sue me?” He rubbed his forehead. “Oh, man, my dad... he always told me, like a hundred times to have renters insurance. And like, I always told him, who needs renters insurance?” He jabbed a thumb into his chest. “*I need renters insurance.*”

Eric shrugged, “I don’t think zombie cars are covered.”

Mike stopped. “That’s not funny.”

“It’s a little funny.”

Mike turned on him. “Why did you lead them to my place, E?”

He called him E. Maybe things weren’t so bad after all. This was the moment, the moment Eric could say everything he always wanted to and then Mike would be happy to come to his place. “I didn’t *lead* them. You know, I just.” He blinked. “You were close. And you. Had

stairs. I didn't think a car could go upstairs." He swallowed. For big moments this was zero out of four stars. Unsatisfied. Do Not Pair Me With This Driver Again.

From behind them, a grinding noise. They slowly turned and saw a glow from down the street. Fireworks that were getting closer and closer.

"What the hell is that?" asked Mike.

Eric put a hand on Mike's chest, gently suggesting they keep going.

A bone white Cadillac came out of the darkness into a pool of light. Its wheels looked like they were on fire, but the tires had blown and the bare metal was grinding into the pavement.

Ruhrrrrrrrrrrrr, ruhrrrrrrrrrrrr.

Eric and Mike ran the two blocks to Topanga Avenue.

The drag was filled with roaming cars, like a drunk driving convention had come to town. Each one was stuffed with people who had been out for a good time on Saturday night. Dead faces pressed against the windows, arms and legs twisted around. Stuffed as they were, the cars droned on.

"They look like clown cars," uttered Mike in disbelief.

An Outback and a Ford Fiesta fought over a young, white guy in a t-shirt and jeans, a tattoo on his forearm. The Fiesta held onto his legs while the Outback gripped his arms. As he screamed, the two cars came together, kissing bumper to bumper and the man was gone. The cars shook. A t-shirted torso with dead eyes appeared in the back window of the Outback, while the lower half showed up in the Fiesta.

Mike puked out his dinner and Eric thought about doing the same.

The two cars turned on them.

Behind them, the caddie had caught up.

Eric spotted a gap through the cars and maybe they could just get across. Couple of minutes after that, they'd be at his place. He had Mike's pot in his pocket. They could even light up on his couch and forget about this nightmare. Mike wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his robe. They could do it. Eric was sure.

The gap filled. Cut off by a dented, gray Nissan.

"My car," whispered Eric. Inside were three people he had never seen before. All of them staring at him with lifeless eyeballs.

"What do we do?" asked Mike as the cars moved closer.

Eric took a breath and mumbled, "Something I've only seen in movies." He ran toward his Nissan, jumped, one foot landed on the hood, the next on the roof. With both feet he landed on the trunk, denting it, and then onto the ground, super hero style. His eyes wide with surprise, he announced, "I did it." He turned to Mike, the cars still approaching him. "Come on, come on!"

"Fuck me," Mike whispered. He ran. Jumped. Got on the hood, scrambled onto the roof, and came tumbling down off the back of the Nissan. Eric stepped forward and caught him, taking them both to the ground, Mike landing on top.

"Ow," said Eric.

Mike pushed himself up and off of him.

The cars began to turn around.

Eric pointed at the McDonald's on the corner. "We'll go through the parking lot, my place isn't far." As they ran, Mike veered towards an empty cop car, cherries still spinning. He reached for the driver's side door.

"What are you doing?" asked Eric.

"Dude, it'll be faster if we drive."

"I don't think being in a car is a good idea right now," said Eric as he grabbed Mike.

The cop car moved forward as they ducked around the hood and into the Mickey D's parking lot. The cruiser rolled forward and joined the other cars, including the Nissan, following the guys into the parking lot. Eric and Mike moved around the building, past the empty restaurant with its lights still on.

Almost to the side street, Eric heard a deep rumble that shook the world. *RUHRRRR*, *RUHRRRR!*

To their right, rattling across Topanga toward them, was the military tanker truck that had started all this. It's headlights bearing down on them. *RUHRRRR*, *RUHRRRR!*

Nipping at the truck's back wheel, trying to find its balance was the motorcycle with the dead driver laying across the top like a wet blanket.

With the tanker truck blocking their exit, the duo stepped back into the lot. From the other entrance, more cars poured in from Topanga, pulling in the wrong way into the Drive Thru lane. For a hot second, Eric thought about climbing over another fence, but the barbed wire looping around the top of the brick wall dissuaded him of that idea.

Ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrr!

Eric's Nissan had made its way to the front of the pack and was getting closer.

A hot rage poured over him. They were so close, so close to getting away, so close to being safe. He charged the Nissan. He raised a foot and kicked in the driver's side headlight. *Ruhrrrrr*. The car kept rolling. He backed up and smashed the other headlight. *Ruhrrrrr*. It didn't stop. Stepping back again, Eric started at the grill. "Fuck you, fuck you, you stupid piece of shit!" The grill cracked.

"Eric!" shouted Mike.

He kept going. Kicking. Stepping back. Kicking.

The car lurched forward — *Ruhrrrrr!* — and Eric tumbled to the ground. A pull at his legs. It was cold. He felt like he was falling deeper and deeper into freezing water. He thought he screamed but he wasn't sure. Around the edges his vision dimmed and he felt so tired, so alone. He was going to surrender, after all what did he have to live for —

Warmth flooded his body, his vision came back into focus. Mike had him by the hands. Pulling. Gasping for air, Eric got his other leg against the bumper of the Nissan and pushed. Together, they broke Eric free.

Retreating into the corner of the parking lot, Eric and Mike held each other, backs pressing against the concrete block wall. From left and right, cars rolled toward them. They moved slower, like they were enjoying it.

Ruhrrrrr, ruhrrrrr!

"Oh man," said Eric. "I just realized why they're making that noise." He paused. "Driver." He looked at Mike. "They're looking for drive-urrrrrrrrrrrsssss." He laughed. Desperate, ugly.

Mike snorted. He was crying, afraid that this was it.

And this was it. This was the moment. Eric realized he couldn't wait anymore. And he needed to do something. After all, this was the end. He grabbed Mike by the edges of his dumb robe and pulled him close and kissed him. They had kissed before, but not like this. This was everything. This was Eric's overwhelmed heart overwhelming Mike's. This was the last, best kiss ever.

Light hit them. They glowed in the darkness of the McDonald's parking lot. A thumping. Eric thought for sec it was their hearts beating. But, no, because Mike, pulling away from the kiss, heard it too. They looked up.

That's when the sky opened fire.

Eric and Mike ducked and covered.

Machine guns screamed. Hot metal rounds coming down a hundred times a second, ripping through the cars. Metal skin dotted. Windshields exploded. Engine blocks shattered.

The machine guns stopped screaming. The thumping moved away and Eric and Mike cautiously stood. In the sky, military helicopters found new targets on Topanga, unleashing death from above.

Cars burned in the parking lot. Glass cracked, pieces tumbled to the ground. A tire rolled away.

Five heavily armed soldiers, faces covered in gas masks, picked their way through toward Eric and Mike. A muffled young man barked something to them, but Eric couldn't hear. His ears rang like he just stepped out of concert. "What?"

"Are...you...ok?" repeated the soldier, enunciating everything. "Do...you...need...medical...assistance?"

Eric and Mike weren't sure if they should nod or shake their heads. They ended up waving off the soldier, who twisted his finger in the air and led the others out, leaving Eric and Mike alone.

Mike took Eric's hand. "That was...something."

Sounds of gunfire in the distance.

"Yeah, I really thought we were going to die.

"I meant the kiss."

A faint *boom* of something blowing up.

This time Mike took the initiative and kissed him. It was almost as good.

"You hungry?" asked Eric. "I'm, like, starving."

"Come on," said Mike, nodding to the McDonalds. "My treat." He grinned.

They walked together, hand in hand, winding their way through former cars toward the side door. Eric paused when they reached what was left of his dented gray Nissan, now a collection of dented gray Nissan parts. He reached inside, past the bodies, searching. "Sorry, sorry." He held his breath. He found his phone and pulled it out of the car. It was cracked with a bullet hole through it.

Eric sighed and tossed it back in. He took Mike's hand. "You think they got any nuggets?"

The End.