

Circumference

By Joe Ricker

Close to midnight, the bus rushed down a lightless highway and Mae Vaughn strained to see past her reflection into the darkness outside, but she couldn't. Pale blue eyes and everything about her was as sharp as the blade she was holding. The flame she held to the blade, though, was soft and round. She sat in the last seat on the bus near the lavatory. There were three other passengers, all succumbing to the rocking as it groaned along and they fell into their own comfortable slumbers dreaming of what they'd left behind or what they were headed to. Mae Vaughn glanced up to the driver, who sipped his coffee. She put the lighter on the seat and pulled the belt-line of her jeans down. She squeezed the strap of her purse tight between her teeth and whimpered when she put the blade to the name tattooed on the soft flesh along the ridge of her hip—*Kensey Waite*.

The assumption of metal and cement is that it can keep a man contained so they combine the two to build prisons, yet all they contain is cold even when the sun beams through the barred windows. Kensey could always find relief in the coldness of the walls on his bare back or his forehead on the bars as he waited. The seasons rolled and tumbled over each other like young playful pets until Kensey walked out of the prison to the car waiting for him.

Kensey kicked the mud from his shoes and reached for the pack of cigarettes on the dashboard before slumping into the passenger seat. He waved his fingers near the lighter anticipating the click and bounce. Tank watched them, mesmerized almost, by the blackened thumbnail, the lightning bolts on the web of his hand below his thumb, and the wedding band he wore on his index finger. Kensey took a long drag and trapped a cough in his throat behind clenched teeth.

"Go," he said.

Tank pulled the shifter down one gear too many, readjusted, and the car moved forward with mud and water lapping and slurping at the tires. Tank rubbed his stomach then pulled on the flap of his jacket. His body odor drifted over to Kensey who ignored it except to roll his window down and lean closer to the air blowing in.

"You hungry?" Tank asked.

"Nah."

"You mind if I stop and get a slice?"

Kensey looked at his stomach and the flesh revealed below his shirt. "Wouldn't want you to go hungry."

At the store, Kensey stood outside with a fresh cigarette and leaned against the front fender. Tank went in and Kensey watched children riding in circles on their bicycles, skirting the edges of puddles with a dotted spray of brown up the back of their shirts. He finished his cigarette and flicked it into a footprint in the mud. Twenty minutes later, Tank came out with a pizza box and his hand under the lid pulling out a slice.

Tank slipped into the seat and maneuvered the box into the vehicle stretching his head back to pull the pizza in between his neck and above the steering wheel. He slid the

box on the dash. Tank was slipping a crust back into the box and reaching for another slice when Kensey swung himself into the back seat.

“What are you doing?” Tank asked, adjusting the rearview to see Kensey.

“Like old times,” he responded looking away from Tank’s open mouthed chewing. “Let’s ride around awhile. I’d like to see what’s changed since I’ve been gone.”

Tank shifted the car into gear with his left hand. They pulled onto Congress Street and drove toward the West End, past Monument Square, where the schizophrenics wailed and screamed at passing cars; dreadlocked hippies strummed chords on out-of-tune guitars with the cases open and a few dimes and crumpled bills in there waited for more to arrive; the panhandlers who were jaundiced and dirty moaned their mantra, *spare change*, and expelled the stench of beer into the wind. The car stopped at a red light. Tank began his fourth slice. The corner at the library was fenced off for renovations. They moved on, up the hill past the chain stores and bars where the hipsters wore their black skinny jeans and smoked hand rolled cigarettes with PBR pounders held between their knees. Continuing, they passed the hotel, its plaza swarming with pigeons and seagulls diving for thrown cheese doodles and bread. Bums napped on benches moving occasionally to wave the flies away. At Longfellow Square, Tank turned left and quickly right, passing the adult toy store and the fag bar. When they reached the promenade, Tank had finished half the pizza.

Kensey made his way to a nearby bench, extended his arms across the backrest, and stared blankly through the budding trees toward the oil tanks and the Route 1 Bridge. Tank carried the pizza box from the car and took a seat next to Kensey.

“What are you going to do about Mae?”

“You know where she is?”

“I tracked her to Buffalo, then Chicago. She stayed in San Francisco for a year. She’s up in Toronto now.”

“Maybe she thinks because I’m not supposed to leave the country I won’t.”

“I think you should leave the area. When the Somalis find out you’ve been released they’re going to—”

“What makes you think they don’t already know?”

Tank stopped chewing and lowered his slice of pizza down to the box resting on his lap. “You should get out of here then. I have a place down in Florida you could stay.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“Where did you hide the money?”

“In a place where no one goes.”

Tank thought for a moment. “I still can’t believe she did it, Kensey.”

“Sending me to prison kept me safer than being on the street.”

“The Brotherhood?”

Kensey nodded.

In the car, Kensey unfolded a slip of paper he’d pulled from his pocket and read the address to Tank. They drove down Forrest Avenue into Westbrook to the address. Tank parked the car across the street and looked at Kensey.

“This is a half-way house.”

Kensey nodded and tapped a cigarette from his pack.

They waited for hours watching the work bus drop off parolees. The streetlights came on dimly and grew brighter as the sunlight faded and night arrived. Kensey burned through his pack of cigarettes, and Tank fought his curiosity to ask why they were there. They watched a group of smokers stand beneath the streetlight. Kensey took no particular interest in any of them until one man came out of the house to join the group. The other men stopped laughing and talking, flicked their cigarettes, and went back into the house leaving the man to smoke alone. Kensey leaned forward and folded his arms over the dashboard.

“He’s popular,” Tank said. “You know that guy?”

“Ratted on my cellmate. Fucker got done indecent because of him.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I might cut his head off.”

Mae Vaughn’s telephone rang while she flattened her hair in the laundry room with an iron. It was long and she had dyed it black. A gray cat rolled to his back and stretched his legs on the sofa when she passed.

“Hello?”

“Ms. Waite?”

“Who is this?”

“This is Detective Robertson. I’m calling to inform you that your husband was released from prison an hour ago. If you’d—”

Mae hung up the phone and ran to the door. She checked the deadbolt, and despite her apartment being on the fifth floor, she went around the house to check the windows. The cat leapt to the table and stroked his paw with his tongue then rolled it over his right ear. The phone began ringing again. She charged at it, and pulled the cord from the wall.

Tank set a bottle of Senator’s Club Whiskey on the table. Kensey, shirtless and skinnier than Tank remembered, twisted the plastic top from the bottle and took a long, burning pull. He shook his head, and took another.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting drunk,” Kensey answered.

“Do you want some coke or something?”

“Snort or soda?”

“Soda.”

“No. Did you get the sander?”

Tank nodded and pulled a palm sander from a paper bag. “What’s this for?”

Kensey gulped another pull and looked down at the iron cross tattooed on his ribs, just below his left pec. The ink was faded and green. Below his other pec was a clock with no hands. Kensey ripped another two gulps from the bottle.

“Did you bring the other stuff?” Kensey asked, stretching the sander cord to an outlet.

“Yeah, but you’re not going to do what I think you are, are you?”

“No. You are.”

Tank wiped his palms over the flaps of his shirt. “Nah, nah, nah. I can’t do that, Kensey.”

Kensey pulled a revolver from his back pocket. He pulled the hammer back and pointed it at Tank's stomach. "I'll shoot you right in your fucking gut."

A look of hurt rolled over Tank's face.

"Aw, you gonna cry fat-fuck? Cry for me. Let me see those big whimpering fat boy tears. C'mon Tank."

Tank maintained his look while Kensey took a pull from the bottle and blamed his watering eyes on the harshness of the whiskey. He slid the hammer forward, stood, and swatted Tank's cheek with the gun.

"Pick up the sander or I'll kill you right now."

Kensey sat, and lifted his left hand to the top of his head. Tank picked up the sander, stepped toward Kensey, and thumbed the switch.

The humming of the hand tool made Kensey's skin tingle until Tank pressed the rounded edge into the center of his tattoo. It was a quick, bike-dumping road-rash kind of burn, until the first several layers of skin were gone and Kensey's blood slid over the grit of the sandpaper. The pain settled into the bone, vibrating the ribs and sending a twisting pain through his neck. Tank worked the machine up and down, and the pain became a source of lucid memories for Kensey – memories pulled to help him through the pain; the way Mae's cheeks drained pale when she caught a glimpse of him from the stand at his trial, the last he'd seen of her face. He looked up at Tank's face and how the words he'd used had fallen like timber against the back of the only friend he had.

When it was done, and Kensey felt the coolness of his blood sliding along the groove of his hip, the two men sat across from each other at the table. Tank pulled in wheezing breaths over his bottom lip. His chin and red cheeks were freckled with drying blood. Kensey sat hunched over with his left shoulder and the wound facing Tank. He lit a cigarette and tossed the lighter onto the table. The bottle of Senator's Club was half empty.

Kensey lifted his head. "I'm sorry, Tank. I didn't mean those things."

Tank stood. "Your car is in the garage." He tossed a set of keys on the table and left.

Mae Vaughn lay in bed running her finger over the scar that had once been a mark of slightly raised, inked skin in the form of Kensey's name. She'd eliminated every reminder of him, the tattoo, pictures, even little phrases of his she'd adopted into her own vernacular. The cat even, which was crunching away on food at his dish, she'd taken in because Kensey was allergic. She tried to remember his face—the face that would come for her. She'd spent years pressing her lips against that face, waking to it, brushing sweat from it. The last time she'd seen it before she testified against him, she'd slapped it. But she couldn't remember it. She remembered his smell. Even after five years had passed, sometimes her dreams would trick her into smelling him in the room, on her sheets, biting gently into her shoulder. Each day had been longer than she wanted to endure, but five years had passed, and yesterday, she gave herself the scar she was rubbing.

Tank found a bar that was mostly empty and sulked in a corner with a plate of nachos and a gin and tonic. Halfway through his drink, he hadn't touched his nachos and the gin was giving him heartburn. The weight against his leg was gaining. In the bathroom, he unraveled the bottom of the bag of shit clinging to the adhesive around his

stomach and emptied it into the toilet—a daily reminder of the 12 gauge round that should have killed him.

When Tank returned to the house, Kensey's car was gone. The floor and table had been cleaned of the sprays and spots of blood. The neck of the whiskey bottle was broken off. The cord of the palm sander was wrapped tightly around the neck of the man sprawled out on the kitchen floor. The yellowed white of his dull eyes bulged from his head. The crude oil darkness of his skin seemed impossible to Tank and his hopes of ever seeing Kensey alive again vanished.

The Somalis brought a million and a half dollars worth of heroin into the Portland Harbor every two weeks, which is why every two weeks it was practically impossible to get a cab on a Friday night. Somalis took control of the livery industry with the influx of refugees. They stacked themselves in apartments, collected a government check, and saved enough to buy a car. Half of them didn't have licenses, but as long as the cab was stickered, there was no reason for the cops to pull them over without bearing the stigma of racial profiling. From the harbor, they transported the product to places like South Portland, Lewiston, Sanford, and Biddeford for the big deals. The rest they peddled out of their cabs. Kensey tracked it all up from that—one shithead passing a bundle.

The night of a drop off, Kensey and Tank called a cab. They waited for the dented Lincoln pull to the curb. Tank climbed in the back seat. Kensey went around the car and rapped on the driver's window.

"You speak English?"

"Yes good," the cabbie answered.

The cabbie pressed the fare button on his meter. "Where you are going?"

"Which way is East?" Tank asked.

"Excuse please?" The cabbie looked back at Tank. Kensey slipped a zip-tie around the door frame and the opening in the driver's window. Tank lifted the sawed-off and rested it on the seat.

"In case you want to pray," Kensey said climbing into the cab.

"Nonononononono," the cabbie looked away from the gun and held his hands up. He glanced at Kensey in the rearview and turned again toward the barrel of Tank's shotgun. "You Mr. Kensey. I see you in the papers. Mr. Kensey, why you do this to me?"

"Asa lama lakum, motherfucker. We're going to your drop tonight. You don't get out of this cab before your brains do unless you do everything I tell you to. Now drive."

The cabbie fidgeted and tried to regain his composure. He pulled the cab awkwardly back onto the street.

"Don't forget to call in," Kensey whispered.

The cabbie pressed his 2-way against his lips, "Pick-up, number seven."

Ten-four.

"We should bail," Tank told Kensey. Kensey refused. The cabbie already knew his name. The consequences would be the same. Kensey made the cabbie drive to an empty school parking lot and kill the cab light. "You're done for the night. Call it in."

The cabbie maneuvered more calmly that time. "Clear. Number seven out of seat."

Ten-four.

When the time came, Kensey explained to the driver to make his pick-up. They dropped Tank off on the corner of Commercial and India, where Mae sat waiting and hot-boxing her cigarettes. Before the cabbie drove down to the wharf, Kensey put a .45 hollow-point piece of lead, mushroomed out from impact, in the cabbie's hand. "That's what a bullet looks like when it penetrates skull." Then Kensey sunk to the floor and pulled a blanket over him.

After the pick-up, Mae and Tank followed the cab to Biddeford where it pulled into the parking lot of an apartment building. Behind every window flashed the silhouette of a pit bull or Rottweiler. The cabbie pressed the button in the glove box to pop the trunk and moments later, Kensey watched it open and close. There were two men. One of them rapped on the hood and their footsteps stopped.

"What the fuck is that?" One of the men asked rubbing his fingers over the flange of the zip-tie.

"Yo, what the fuck is—"

The other man pulled on the handle. Kensey dumped three rounds into the door. The men scrambled on the ice, shooting wildly at the cab, clipping the cabbie. The cabbie gassed it toward the exit. In taking the turn, he slipped Kensey from the back seat out onto the snow. The stairway to the apartment filled with shirtless and t-shirted men. Kensey emptied his clip forcing the men to spill down the stairs and over the railing or duck back into the apartment. Mae's car slid sideways into the parking lot, bumping the rear fender of the cab just enough to push the Lincoln out of control and into a snow bank. Tank swung from the car and blasted both barrels of his shotgun at the stairwell.

Kensey slipped a fresh clip into his pistol and shot the lock on the trunk of the cab. He kicked the trunk open and slung the bag of cash inside over his shoulder.

"East is behind you," he told the cabbie who was sprawled over the seat pawing at the gunshot wound in his leg.

It seemed like it had happened only moments before. Tank hoisted the body into his trunk and took a moment to study his neighbor's windows. He went back into the house and pulled the gas line from the stove. Under the sink, he found a box of steel wool, put it in the microwave, and cranked the dial. Tank hurried from the house dropping the man's wallet in the empty flower bed outside the door.

Mae was making her way through Maine from Canada to Emden Pond. She traveled down route 2, the path that Benedict Arnold used to help defeat the French in the war, a victory he was forgotten for. She and Kensey had spent their honeymoon on the pond, at the lakehouse Kensey had stayed at during summers when he was a kid. They'd planned their life together there, dreams, hopes, and children. At night, they had laid outside on the dock staring into the sky; naked, huddled close against the crisp breeze off the water. Kensey'd slid her wedding band up and down her finger. "No matter what happens," he'd said, "we'll always come full circle."

The detectives brought Tank into the morgue smiling and joking with one another. The room was exactly how Tank had imagined it—tile walls, lots of shiny metal, bright,

too bright. He couldn't help but be saddened by that, or by the fact that he had actually foreseen the event.

The body lay beneath the sheet with nothing but ruffles where Kensey's head should have been. That, he hadn't imagined. Even knowing the brutality of the crime, the body looked fake—a sick joke laid out before him, twisted and awkward from being in the trunk of Kensey's car. They pulled the sheet to the waistline exposing the chest and the wound below his pec. The clock tattoo seemed more faded and smaller. Tank glanced over the body at the shoulders, then elbows. He looked away at the sight of the wrists.

“Is it him? Is this Kensey Waite?”

By the water, Mae listened to the loons howling across the stillness—flat, black, and a perfect reflection of the sky and moon. In front of the house, she pulled a pallet from an old well and reached down to the piece of rebar sticking out of the cement. She worked the knot loose from the metal and pulled the bag from the depth of the well.

In the next town over, Mae stopped at the Solon Hotel and ordered a scotch neat. The man next to her slid his empty beer bottle to the edge of the bar, focused on the Channel Six news. Bill Green's Maine outdoors. Joe Cupo's weather. Bruce Glasier with sports. Cindy Williams.

A body discovered five days ago in the trunk of a vehicle in a Portland parking garage has been identified as thirty-seven-year-old, Kensey Waite. Six years ago, Kensey Waite was found guilty of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon for shooting a Portland cab driver. Waite's wife testified for the prosecution in his trial, from which Waite received five years in Warren State Prison. His wife was not available for comment.

“Sounds to me like *she* deserved to die that way,” the man said.

The news slid into its feel good story about pet adoption. Mae lifted the drink to her lips, ice rattling against the glass from her trembling hands. She took the scotch in one swallow, paid for her drink, and went to the restroom. Her eyes watered, but she did the best she could to put on her makeup—mascara and lipstick. She gave up on the eyeliner. A few strands of hair clung to her black dress. She pulled them away and twisted them from her fingers into the sink. Outside the bar, she took a deep breath and clenched her hands together. She hadn't been that nervous since her wedding day.

Her car idle in the parking lot and Mae squinted tears from her eyes. They rolled to her lips where she smoothed them away with her tongue. She didn't see his hand until it was against her face. His blackened thumbnail slid along the edge of her jaw and her breathing slowed.

“Did you miss me, Kensey?”

Kensey moved forward in the back seat. His breath tickled her ear. “I told you we'd come full circle.”

Mae smiled and pushed her cheek into his palm.

Joe Ricker is a former bartender and cab driver currently teaching English in upstate New York. Esquire referred to him as "a man of letters who's gentle in the way that only the toughest hard asses can be." His writing has appeared in Nightclub & Bar Magazine, Deadfall: Crime Stories by New England Writers,

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