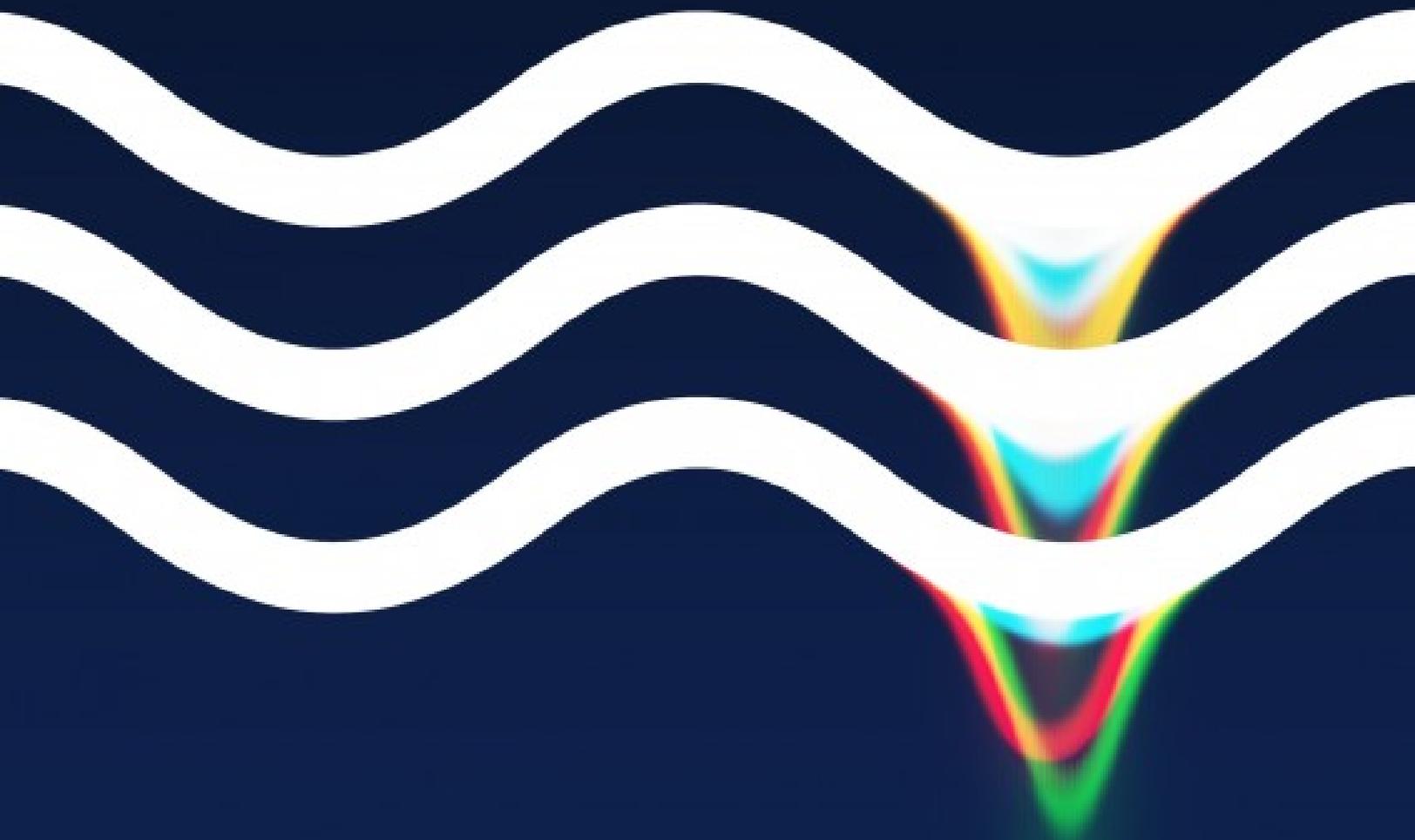


**The Day of Knowing:**

# **CARRIER WAVE**



**Robert Brockway**

# **Carrier Wave**

A Day of Knowing Tale

*By Robert Brockway*

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## About the Collection

The Day of Knowing is a collection of interconnected horror shorts that each build upon a larger fictional world. Every tale is self-contained, and no single story will require that you read any others first. However, every short also builds the lore of the Day of Knowing universe, and readers that follow all of the stories in chronological order will reveal a larger tale that spans dozens of short stories across several decades. The order thus far is: *M55*, *Carrier Wave*, *The Judas Goat* (collected in *Tomorrow's Cthulhu* from Broken Eye Books).

## About the Author

Robert Brockway is a senior editor and columnist for Cracked.com. He is the author of the [urban fantasy/horror Unnoticeables trilogy from Tor Books](#), the cyberpunk novel [Rx: A Tale of Electronegativity](#), and the apocalyptic non-fiction essay collection *Everything Is Going To Kill*

*Everybody.* The Day of Knowing shorts and others are published on his website, [Robertbrockway.net](http://Robertbrockway.net). Follow him on Twitter [@brockway\\_llc](https://twitter.com/brockway_llc).

“So this man walked into the Shop Shop, pulled out a boombox, played some music-“

“Some new wave *faggot* music,” the man said, then spat chaw-juice onto his own boot. He glared at it with disapproval.

“Played some music, and left. Then the clerk jumped over the counter and beat the victim to death? Just like that?”

“Just like that,” the man agreed. He squinted at Helms’ badge again, like he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

“So what did this man look like?” Helms asked, not looking up from her notebook.

“Like some sort of communist hippy liberal pussy. Or something. I don’t know, I can tell you he didn’t vote for The Gipper, that’s for damn sure.”

Helms glanced up from her notes and fixed the witness, one Jeremy Boont, with a questioning stare.

Boont winced a little, spat more chaw, and stared off at his truck like he thought that description should suffice.

“How tall was he?” Helms prompted.

“I don’t know. Not very.”

“What color was his hair? His eyes?”

Boont leaned in close to Helms, his gut pushing her notepad back into her writing hand.

“What do I look like to you?” He asked, slowly.

“Excuse me?” Helms took a step back. Thought that might have been a mistake: Probably should have stood her ground and made him back off.

“I look like some kind of faggot to you?” Boont asked.

“I...I don't...”

“Like I just stand around, gazing at men's hair, lookin' deep into their eyes. You think that's what I do?”

“So you didn't notice anything at all about the man with the boombox?”

“I noticed -- and you can write this down now, this here's my statement: He looked like he didn't vote for Reagan, and sucks cocks in a rest stop bathroom. That's all I saw. Where I'm from men don't look at other men, and if they do, they sure as hell don't *see* 'em. That's faggot business.”

“So you couldn't tell me what your own daddy looked like?” Helms asked.

“You sayin' my *daddy's* a faggot now, lady? *Are you kiddin' me?* Who's tellin' you I'm gay for men, huh? Who's been spreading lies? I tell you, I find who's been sayin' this stuff, I'm gonna stick my gun up his ass and fuck him with forty four calibers.”

“See, now *that* sounds kind of gay...”

“WHAT?!” Boont reared back, like he was going to deck Helms, but Officer Price stepped between them and stared him down.

Boont returned the glare for a minute, but ultimately broke. He spat chaw, in what he probably thought was a defiant gesture, and looked at his truck again.

“That's all I got to say,” he finished.

“Why don’t you and your buddy get on outta here before we break out the breathalyzers, all right?” Price said.

Boont coughed, pulled up his belt and adjusted his worn baseball cap – Federal Booby Inspector, it said – before leaving. Made a big show of taking his time about it.

When he and his buddy finally made the truck and pulled out, tires squealing, of course, Price turned to Helms.

“You get anything useful out of the other one?” She asked him.

“I asked if the suspect had any scars or distinguishing tattoos. He asked me if I thought he was a faggot,” Price answered.

Helms laughed.

“The bible-thumping hicks in this town, I swear to god.”

“That’s not fair,” Price said, “it’s got nothing to do with this town or the bible. I’ve known Jeremy Boont since 6<sup>th</sup> grade. His daddy owns a furniture company that makes fancy wicker chairs and such. Sells ‘em to yuppies on the west coast for thousands of dollars. Drives a bright yellow Porsche. Boont isn’t some poor uneducated bible-thumper; *I’m* some poor uneducated bible thumper -- he’s just a dipshit.”

“Look, if it walks like a hick and fucks its sister like a hick, I’ll call it a hick,” Helms replied. “Plenty of them around here.”

“You should come to church with me sometime,” Price said. “You’ll see where all the good people in this town are hiding.”

“Price,” Helms said, “my mom was a Baptist and my dad was a Bastard. Neither would want me anywhere near your church.”

“Ah,” Price chuckled, “I’ll make a convert out of you someday. If only for the free coffee.”

They fell quiet for a moment.

“So...” Helms said, eager to switch subjects. “The other one told you the same thing about the music guy? Just walked in, hit play, then left and the clerk went ballistic?”

“Basically, yeah.” Price looked around the parking lot, saw nobody was watching, and pulled out a cigarette. “Kid got any priors?”

Helms made a face at him as he lit it, and took two steps upwind.

“Zip,” she said, “just out of high school. Solid B student. Likes band, according to the manager.”

“A *band geek* nearly tore my throat out?” Price said, gesturing to the three gouges on the side of his neck.

“Quit being dramatic,” Helms said, “he barely grazed you. Besides, you always got me to save your ass.”

Price laughed.

“You see him in the back of the cruiser when Jackson pulled away? He was trying to bite through the damn window. What turns a pudding of a kid like that into a feral maniac all of a sudden? Drugs?”

“Maybe,” Helms scuffed at the pavement with her shoe, knocking cigarette butts towards the drain in the middle of the parking lot. “Seems like there’s something new coming out every day.”

“Yeah, maybe...” Price blew smoke from the side of his mouth, angling it away from Helms.

She smiled at him.

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“We’ve got reports of a 708 at the Bowl N Chug. Two officers on scene requesting backup.”

“Price and Helms responding,” Price said, then set the handset back in its cradle.

Helms hit the sirens and flipped a U-turn, cutting off a bright yellow Porsche. Price watched the mirrors and saw a hand slide out its window, giving them the bird.

“Ten to one it’s Joe Greene again,” Price said.

“Probably decked some guy because his toe was over the line,” Helms agreed.

Price grabbed the oh-shit handle as Helms cut a wide, fast, turn down Everett and floored it toward Center. Engine roar filled the cabin. The cruiser crested the dip just before the courthouse and went airborne for a split second.

“Jesus!” Price laughed, “there’s no way the call’s this urgent. You know that, right?”

“When do I get to do *this*?” Helms grinned, but kept her eyes locked to the road.

She swung the tail wide and power slid to a stop in the parking lot of the Bowl N Chug.

“Whoa,” Price let out the breath he forgot he was holding, and shook his head as he stepped out of the car. “Someday you’re gonna get us killed, driving like that.”

“Nah,” Helms said, slamming her door. “Cheese dogs and cigarettes’ll get you first.”

Price thumbed the release on his holster and let his hand rest on the grip of his pistol. He got to the door first, checked his corners, stepped in and quickly moved to the side. Helms did the same behind him. They spread out, each watching half of the alley. There was nobody at the front desk, nobody in any of the lanes, save the far one. Helms could see legs sticking out from behind the ball delivery, and two males wrestling on the ground between the benches. One of them was wearing blues – maybe Jackson. Then she saw his partner, Hughes, backed up against the rails, his pistol drawn and centered on the fighting men.

She glanced at Price, who hadn't yet spotted it from his angle. But he caught the meaning in her eyes. He pulled his service revolver and pointed it at the floor in front of him. Helms followed suit. They covered the distance quickly, sticking to their sides and watching the blind spots behind pillars. Helms made the scene first, came around the ball delivery and eyeballed the limp body. Male, just shy of six feet, probably over 200 pounds. Lying face down, not moving, no blood or signs of serious injury. Likely just unconscious. The priority here was Jackson and his assailant.

The attacker was straddling Jackson, his back to Helms, one hand locked on Jackson's throat, the other fighting off Jackson's frantic grabs toward his face. Jackson tried to kick out of the hold, and the pair rolled into the gutter, shifting position so Helms could see the assailant's face.

Shit, it was Joe Greene.

He was a troublemaker and a bit of a prick, sure, but he never took an argument beyond a little dust-up, and usually apologized by buying the other guy a beer afterward. Besides, he always cowed like a scolded schoolboy when the cops showed up. But he wasn't just resisting arrest here – Jackson was pouring blood from his left eye, teeth smashed through his lips – this was *attempted murder*.

“Police!” Helms tried, knowing it was pointless.

Helms looked to Hughes. He was trying to back up the stairs to the concession stand, but he couldn't take his wide, unfocused eyes off the fight

long enough to get his footing. He had his gun drawn, but pointed in the air, weaving back and forth above the commotion.

Shellshocked.

She called out ‘police’ and ‘on the ground’ one more time, then let off and focused on moving into position to cover Price. If she’d been alone, she would have had to try to wrestle Joe Greene off, but she knew Price was stronger, and he knew she was the better shot. It didn’t need to be said. Price had holstered his weapon and was running in low, hoping to use the momentum to knock Greene loose from Jackson’s throat. He caught Greene hard around the waist, and they rolled into the next lane, freeing Jackson, who immediately started crawling away, down the lane toward the pins.

Greene didn’t seem to understand that he’d been grabbed from behind. He was making no effort to break out of it, his eyes still locked on Jackson and the ragged trail of blood he left in his wake. Greene was kicking his legs, thrashing and clawing wildly at the air, but making absolutely no effort to pry Price’s hands from around his midsection. Price scooted backward across the lane until he reached the far side of the alley, then levered Greene up and swung him face first into the wall. He pulled one of Greene’s arms down around his back, but couldn’t get a hold of the other. Helms holstered her gun and ran to help. She put her weight into Greene’s shoulder and twisted his free arm downward. She held it in place while Price finished cuffing him, then made the mistake of looking into Greene’s face.

His eyes were beyond bloodshot. Dried white flakes ran down each cheek, like he’d been crying for days. He bared his teeth and snapped at Helms over and over again. He screamed gibberish, a raging staccato bark that seemed to be trying to form words, but never quite made it.

“RAAAH,” Greene gnashed his teeth and beat his own face against the wall, “RAH GRA HEM NO IMHE HOA RAAAA!”

Price grabbed him by the hair and held his head back so he wouldn’t bash his own skull in; Greene spasmed and struggled harder. Together, Helms and Price managed to trip him up and bring him down. She ziptied one

ankle, then the other, and then the two together. Price held a knee in his back and hauled on his shoulders so she could hook the handcuffs and the ankle zips together, leaving Greene hogtied. She knew it was dangerous to bind a person like that for long, but Jesus – look at him. He was still snapping at anything that came near his face, though his eyes never left Jackson.

Shit. Jackson.

Helms jogged down the lane and ducked her head under the pinsetter, where Jackson's blood trail led.

“Jackson!” She called out. “Jackson, are you still with me?”

A wet moan was her only response.

She called in an Officer Down and requested an ambulance, then stood and surveyed the bowling alley.

“How do you get back there?” She yelled to Price.

“Back where?” He said.

“Behind the pins. Jackson's back there!”

“I'm coming,” Price said.

He turned to Hughes, who still had his pistol out, pointing it now at the inert body on the floor.

“Hughes,” Price snapped his fingers. “Hey, you with me?”

“Don't go near it,” Hughes said, after swallowing hard a few times.

“What? Listen, just stay here with Joe while we go check on Jackson. He's not going anywhere. Just make sure he doesn't chew his tongue off or something.”

“TIH NEH IH MO HOA IMHE MO HOA,” Greene growled to himself.

Price turned away from Hughes and jogged back down toward the benches. He rounded the ball return and knelt by the body there.

“No don’t! Don’t get close to-“ Hughes screamed.

Price extended a hand to check the man’s pulse, then became a flailing blur.

Helms didn’t even see the guy move. He was face down one second, then up on his feet the next, holding Price in the air by his neck. Helms pulled her pistol reflexively.

“Hey!” She called, “hey, stop! Let him go!”

It wasn’t exactly protocol, but it was all she could think to say. She closed the distance fast, but the man moved faster. His fingers sunk deep into Price’s throat, holding him six inches above the floor while he sprinted toward Hughes, who scabbled backward up the stairs. Unlike Greene, this guy was dead quiet. The only noise was his shoes squeaking on the polished wood as he ran down Hughes, holding Price in front of him like a shield.

Hughes had no shot, but he took it anyway, firing wildly.

“No!” Helms yelled, too late.

When he had closed to within a few yards, the man heaved Price aside. Price crumpled like a puppet whose strings had been cut. Hughes fired again and again, each shot going wide, and then the man was on him. He grabbed frantically at Hughes’ arm, who twisted and yowled like a wet cat. When he found purchase, the man put a foot on Hughes’ chest and yanked upward. Hughes’ arm came off clean at the shoulder. Still the man made absolutely no noise, not even a grunt of exertion. Hughes stared at his own severed arm and keened like a tea kettle. The man tossed the limb absently aside, then began grappling with Hughes’ remaining arm.

Helms put three bullets in his back, center mass.

He didn't even flinch.

The other arm came off as easy as the first, and was tossed aside with equal disdain. He reached down and grabbed Hughes' left leg by the knee. Hughes kicked and bucked, but to no avail. The man put his foot on Hughes' crotch, and in dead silence, wrenched his leg free from his body. Helms put two more rounds in his back, then steadied herself.

*Slow is smooth, she thought, smooth is fast.*

She took an extra fraction of a second to line it up, then pulled the trigger and put a round in the back of the guy's head. He fell to his knees, then to his side, still clutching Hughes' severed leg in both hands.

Helms holstered her pistol and ran to Price, who was choking and gagging, pulling at his neck. She laid on top of him, pinning his arms to his side, and spoke low and fast and breathless.

"It's okay it's okay it's over you're okay don't fight it just give it a second just one second take a slow breath real slow and easy you're okay--"

Price stopped struggling and was still for a long moment. Then at last came the rasping of a slow, thin breath. He tapped Helms on the arm, and she rolled off him. He didn't sit up, just stared at the ceiling and focused on breathing evenly. Helms went to check on Hughes next, but she could tell at a glance that he was dead. Almost certainly from shock. His face was frozen in a mad mask of disbelieving fear, blue-white and bloodless.

"Two officers down," Helms yelled into her handset. "God damn get everybody over here now!"

She rechecked Price, still breathing rough but consistent, and headed back toward the pinsetter; toward Jackson.

She laid flat on her belly, as if to crawl in after him. But she froze.

Fear, shaky and electric, wrapped around the base of her spine and pinned her in place.

“Jackson,” she called out instead, “hang in there, help is coming.”

She went back to Price, and sat at his side, stroking his forehead until the EMTs arrived.

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“I told you half a dozen times already,” Danny Greene whined to Helms, “we was just minding our own business, throwing a few rounds. When this little guy came up and held out a tape recorder – one of those dealies that fits in your hand. He hit play and it made some beep boop kinda sounds, then he just turned and walked away before we could even say nothin’. Me and Joe and Marky bowled a few more rounds, then I looked back and Joe was crying or something. So I made fun of him some -- like you do -- and he just flipped out and started beating on me. Well I took right the hell off, I don’t mind telling you, and that was all I saw. I went back to Becky’s trailer and I got real drunk there until I fell asleep on the foldout. You can ask her, I was there!”

Helms rubbed her eyes with her pointer finger and thumb. She was so tired that her vision would go blurry every few minutes until she paused to massage life back into them. She took another sip of Styrofoam flavored coffee from the absurdly tiny cup, and pretended to recheck her notes. There was no need. Danny Greene had told the same story each time he was questioned, and the other witnesses backed him up as best they could. Nobody saw the guy with the tape recorder, but they all saw Joe go nuts on Danny for no real reason. Then he turned on the folks in the next lane, then the manager, until everybody bolted, leaving him and Mark Kimmel alone in the alley. Witnesses said that when Joe started attacking folks, Mark just laid down on the floor and went still. Stayed like that the whole time.

Jackson had so many stitches in his face he looked like a scarecrow, but he managed to keep the eye. His statement said he and Hughes arrived on

scene to find a prone Mark Kimmel, while Joe Greene roamed aimlessly up and down the lanes, muttering to himself. Hughes split off to check on Kimmel, while Jackson went to confront Greene. Hughes got there first, and the second he knelt down by the body, Kimmel sprung to life and hurled him all the way up over the railing into the shoe rental. Kimmel looked around, saw Jackson, seemed to think for a second, then just laid back down and went still. Jackson called out then, and the noise got Greene's attention. He laid into Jackson like a madman, and that's when Helms and Price came on scene.

All the stories matched up. And none of them made sense.

Joe had some assaults on his record, but nothing this serious, and never with his own brother. They were tight as two sticks in a popsicle – if anything, people insulting his brother was the excuse Joe used to fight most often. Mark Kimmel had nothing on his record at all. He hung out with assholes, but if that was a crime half this town was going to jail.

So they, what? Went crazy because of some beeps on a tape recorder?

Even assuming that was true, what Kimmel did was impossible. Not 'crazy on drugs' improbable – *literally impossible*. He lifted Price -- who was six foot and a buck eighty himself -- like a sack of potatoes, and still ran at full speed. Then he pulled off Hughes' limbs without so much as breaking a sweat. Drugs could kill your pain center, make you take a lot more damage -- that would explain why Kimmel didn't go down when Helms emptied into him, but no drug made you superhuman.

And if it *was* the tape recorder that caused it, why did Greene seem to have normal strength and went around attacking strangers, while Kimmel went all Superman but just laid on the floor until somebody got close?

Helms circled and underlined various words in Danny's statement, basically at random. How the hell do you type up something like this without sounding like a maniac yourself?

“You hold tight, Danny,” She said, and scooted her chair back. It wailed metal on metal. “We’ll get you out of here, soon.”

“You fuckin’ better!” Danny said, then immediately regretted it. “Sorry, it’s just... I been in here for hours and I wanna go see Joe. They won’t even tell me how he’s doing.”

He waited to see if Helms would enlighten him, but she just smiled a little when she stepped out the door. Price was waiting with a replacement Styrofoam coffee. He handed it to her and sipped from his own, wincing as it went down.

“How’s the neck?” She asked.

“Dandy,” he croaked, his voice like wet gravel.

Price was speaking as little as possible on his first day back. He wasn’t even supposed to be here yet, but he’d checked himself out of the hospital after only 36 hours. The captain figured it would be better for his recovery to let him stick around and do deskwork, rather than hollering and shouting about forced leave. Helms had been pulled from the field after the shooting while the investigation went through, but she knew that wouldn’t take long. Besides, she could use the time away.

She knew beat cops were supposed to fight against every second of desk-time, but Helms was actually quietly relieved. She’d never so much as fired her service revolver in the line of duty before taking down Kimmel two days ago. Her usual targets were tin cans and paper outlines. She couldn’t say she was exactly losing sleep over it -- but that was what worried her. Helms told herself it was because Kimmel clearly wasn’t human anymore – not with that strength, not with that speed – and she’d seen what he did to Hughes. Knew what was on the line when she pulled that trigger. But there was still a nagging little part of her asking “what if you’re just a killer? What if that’s why it doesn’t bother you – because you’re a psychopath?”

Their station was small; the therapist had to come all the way from Des Moines, and wouldn’t be here until tomorrow. Helms would put up a fight

for show – “guess I gotta go get my head shrunk by some witch doctor” she’d snark – but once that door was closed, she was looking forward to talking to someone. She wasn’t worried about the investigation -- you could go take a look at Hughes’ mangled body if you had any questions about whether or not it was a good shooting. His single remaining leg and three ragged stumps would do all her testifying. But she could sure use somebody with a big rubber stamp that would deem her ‘sane’ right about now. And that wasn’t happening anytime soon. So that left her stuck at the station for at least a week when she should be...

Doing what, exactly? What was her lead here, the crazy music guy?

Price noticed her staring at the wall, delicately sipping hot black water, and grunted.

“What? Sorry, just thinking...”

He grunted again, with an inquisitive tone this time.

“About where we go from here, with the case.”

Price groaned.

“Look, just because we’re both riding desks doesn’t mean the work stops. If all we have is the guy with the tape recorder, then sure, I guess that’s where we start. If nothing else he’s a material witness at two crimes, one assault and one murder...”

A doubtful grunt.

“Well, okay, I’m *assuming* that it’s the same guy. But this is a small town – you really think there are two tape recorder psychos out there?”

An acquiescing groan.

“Right then. I’ve got some paper time in front of me anyway. I’m going to look into noise disturbances, see if there’s anything there. You want to look

into assaults and pull witness reports, see if somebody mentioned a guy with a boombox or a tape recorder or something?”

Price nodded. He smiled at Helms, and slapped her on the shoulder. Her terrible coffee sloshed over her fingers, scalding them. She sighed at nothing in particular and turned away from Danny Greene, still sitting at the holding room table, picking his nose and carefully examining his discoveries.

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Fully 90% of the noise complaints in the last month were from a single person: one Eleanor Dubicek, of 2031 April Terrace, Unit C. She thought the neighbor across the way was ghastly, with his leafblower going so early in the morning. She thought her downstairs neighbor absolutely didn't need to watch Knight Rider that loudly, and her upstairs neighbor was probably listening to Springsteen at such a high volume so as to drown out his criminal dealings. And surely the garbagemen didn't need to make such a racket every Thursday morning – they were probably banging the cans around just to spite her.

Helms read through every single report anyway, just in case the old bat had filed a complaint about the positively disrespectful young man that went around her complex, fiddling with a tape recorder and making people murder each other.

She did not.

The remaining 10% of the noise reports were scattered – mostly kids having parties while their parents were away, drunkenly hollering while they smoked cigarettes on the porch late at night. But there was one interesting report: Two weeks ago, Andrew Falkous called police from the Cosmo's Ladder Trailer Park to complain of a neighbor making loud squeaks and squeals all through the night.

It was thin, but Helms was ready to grab at less. She pushed her chair back and took the report over to Price, who was grimacing down at his own

tower of folders.

“Check this out,” she said, slapping the report down on the desk in front of him.

He arched an eyebrow at her, and stared quietly.

“Just read it,” she said, and left to get them both refills from the coffee machine.

When she got there, she found the pot empty, but still sitting on the active burner. The last dregs of coffee burnt into black tar death.

“Terrell,” she yelled over her shoulder, in the general direction of the office.

“What?” Came an answering voice, already annoyed.

“Did you take the last of the coffee?”

“Yeah, so what?”

Helms turned and stalked out of the breakroom, over to Terrell’s desk. He was a chubby guy, just starting to bald. He used to be a looker, back in the day. Helms knew this, because he told literally everybody about it. He kept a framed photo of his younger self on his own desk. In it, he was standing on the beach somewhere with his shirt off, big smile, defined pecs glistening beneath a bed of curly chest hair. That and the southern accent didn’t make him *unpopular* with the ladies. Helms knew this, again, because Terrell told everybody he met just about as soon as he met them.

“So what?” She sighed. “So if you take the last of the coffee, you make a new pot. Or you at least turn the burner off so we don’t get this...this industrial waste shit to scrape out.”

She rattled the pot at Helms, who just curled his lip and swiveled his chair away from her.

“Making coffee is women’s work,” Terrell said, loud enough for the whole office to hear. “Or maybe the help. You look like both to me.”

Helms entered into a beautiful and elaborate fantasy wherein she cracked the glass pot against the back of his head, the shards exploding outward like a new universe being born. The stupid look on Terrell’s face – hovering there right between confusion and terror...

She should at least say something clever in response, but she’d gone blank while entertaining the beautiful dream, and now the moment had passed. She settled for calling him an asshole, and returned to the breakroom. She set the pot in the sink, filled it with water, and returned to Price.

He’d had enough time to read the report, but he was still flipping back and forth between the pages, trying to decide something.

“What do you think? Worth checking out?” Helms asked.

“Hmm?” Price said.

“Hmm what? Listen, the Chewbacca thing only goes so far. You’ll have to talk sometime.”

“I think,” Price croaked, “that neither of us are allowed to check *anything* out.”

“Oh, no, of course not,” Helms waved his concerns away. “I only meant if it looks solid enough to bug the other guys with. Have them do a follow up or something, just a friendly visit.”

“I...” Price gagged a little and took a second to compose himself. “I think Terrell and Bryant are the only ones on active duty tonight, so no visit is going to be ‘friendly.’”

“Damn,” Helms bit her lip and glanced over at Terrell’s desk. He was deep in concentration filling out the crossword puzzle. No way in hell he’d

follow up on a noise disturbance as a favor to her. And if she tried to explain...

On her first day, Helms showed up with a lucky rabbit's foot on her keychain. Terrell saw it and made some crack about 'you darkies and your voodoo.'

Terrell and Bryant were not an option.

"Maybe it can wait until tomorrow when they're off rotation," Helms agreed.

Price smiled at her, and turned back to his reports.

Helms started back toward her desk, made sure Price was lost once again in the paperwork, and walked right past it, out the side door. She unlocked her cruiser, gave herself ten seconds to feel stupid about what she was doing, then put it in gear and drove off.

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Andrew Falkous would have been a stunningly handsome man if not for the severe overbite and facial psoriasis. He opened the door to his weathered and peeling trailer in nothing but a very open and very pink bathrobe. It took him a long second to realize he was hanging in the breeze, and he tied the belt with no special hurry. Falkous had a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon in one hand and a TV remote in the other. In the background, something with an obnoxious laugh track regularly interrupted their conversation.

"Mr. Falkous?" Helms said.

She was still wearing her uniform. She kept telling herself she wasn't here in an official capacity. The uniform would give everybody the right impression, but maybe if she specifically avoided introducing herself as an officer or mentioning police business she could leave herself an out when this inevitably blew up in her face.

“Mr. Falkous is my daddy, you lil’ sip of molasses,” Falkous said. “You can call me Andy.”

She could practically feel Falkous’ eyes rolling up and down her body.

Helms felt her baton itch.

*Not in an official capacity*, she reminded herself.

Helms turned on her flirtiest smile and giggled.

“Hi, Andy!” She said, putting some ditzy pep in her voice.

A big sloppy grin stumbled around Falkous’ face.

“I heard a neighbor of yours was making a lot noise a few weeks ago?” Helms said, carefully avoiding any mention of a report or the authorities.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, that. Listen, I’m not one for calling the pigs. No offense,” he gestured at Helms with the beer can, sloshed a little out and onto her shoes. “But that guy was at it with his bullshit MTV crap every night for near a week. I tried to settle it like a man, gone over there and knocked right on his door. I ain’t no pussy. But he is – he wouldn’t answer. So, ipso fatso, the pigs.”

“Right,” Helms said, imagining herself on a beach somewhere with a big, icy drink. Utterly alone. All other human beings dead or otherwise confined somewhere far, far away. “What do you mean, MTV music?”

“Like that video channel crap. The beepy and the boopy electronic German stuff. Like that song about cars? Only without even any words. Just noises. Call that music? I should put on some Haggard and crank it up to 11, show that little punk what real-“

“Thanks, Andy!” She bubbled, turning quickly and making for the cruiser.

Helms sat in the driver's seat and stared at the dented aluminum caravan for ten full minutes. She ran over the scenario in her head again and again. She had come out here and verified the report firsthand, and now it really sounded like she might be on to something. She should call the station and have a unit sent out, even if it was Terrell and Bryant. Maybe they wouldn't just laugh it off if she'd scouted it in person first. Maybe they would just laugh harder. She should at least call Price.

And he would say "what are you doing in the field?" and "we're riding desks this week," and "by the book" and "blah blah blah."

Helms knew all of this before she drove out here in the first place. She was just having doubts now because it was time to actually do it – time to pull the trigger and go vigilante. You saw it in movies all the time: A cop gets pulled from the case, but they pursue it anyway on their own time. They get the perp, save the day, and all is forgiven. That's not how it works in real life. If she knocked on the door of that trailer and things went south, it would mean her job, at least.

She drummed on the steering wheel. She checked and rechecked her service revolver. She opened the glovebox for no particular reason, closed it, then opened it again.

*Screw it, she thought, it's going to be nothing anyway. Just some guy with bad taste in music.*

No need to report anything. Nobody would even know, and she and Price would be down one bad lead when they picked up the case again in a week. That's progress.

Helms stepped out of the cruiser and adjusted her belt. Her shoes crunched over gravel and broken glass, then up a set of creaking, crudely built wood stairs. She rapped on the thin aluminum door of the caravan, and took a step back. Her hand rested on the hilt of her pistol. She swallowed hard. Watched the light leaking out from the floorboards so she could tell when footsteps blocked it. They did. A silhouette moved back there.

“Hello sir,” she said, biting back the instinctual urge to identify herself. “We’ve had some noise complaints recently. Just following up on those, if you could spare a moment to answer a few routine questions....”

Silence.

Helms hated this part. The wait. Every traffic stop, every knock on every door -- there was always this agonizing moment. While you waited for whoever was on the other side of that glass, wood, or steel to decide if this was the day they drew down on a cop. She knew most every encounter goes down peacefully, but there was always the chance. There was always the decision to be made, and she had no hand in it. Helms hated that more than anything.

The door creaked open an inch. Just a thin swatch of face – white male, short, maybe 5’4” if he wasn’t slouching, probably 30-40, brown hair, green eyes. Deep bags under them. Pale skin. She couldn’t tell the weight just from the few inches of face showing, but judging by his gaunt cheekbones: Not much. Not exactly a threatening specimen, but a bullet is the great equalizer. She kept her hand on her pistol.

“Sorry to bother you, sir,” Helms tried to sound as harmless as possible. She threw a little ‘even *I’m* annoyed, having to be out here’ into her tone. “We’re just following up on all disturbances from this neighborhood as part of a community outreach program. We’re making sure relations are still solid with your neighbors and there hasn’t been any further escalation between you.”

The single eye narrowed and the door closed a fraction of an inch.

“Look, it’s just this thing my superiors are making us do. I’m sorry to bother you, I really am, but you know how bosses are – and mine get worse around election season. They just want some feedback, make sure you’re not harboring some complaint about us that’ll come back to bite ‘em in the ass around poll time. You know? It’ll only take a second.”

The door opened a bit further, and the man took in Helms from head to toe. Finally he swung the door wide and stepped back. He gestured Helms inside with a sweep of his head.

Helms knew it was a bad idea to step into an unknown premises like this, with no backup. But she also knew there was no way in hell she was getting a search warrant based on ‘this funny feeling she had.’ She stepped around the man – most of her assumptions were right, she saw. Short, skinny, pale. But she was off about the age. She figured he was only in his late 20s, maybe early 30s, after seeing him up close. But he did not wear the years well. Junkie, maybe?

Helms quickly surveyed the interior of the caravan. There wasn’t much to see: A little kitchenette to her right, a stained bench opposite that, piled high with papers and textbooks. A faux wooden door directly across from her, barely the size of a closet. The bathroom, probably. To her left there was a cramped bedroom, barely more than a twin mattress and a couple of nightstands. It was jam packed with electronic equipment – smooth steel surfaces thick with dials, gauges, switches and needles. They were all on and active, flashing, sweeping and clicking with hidden purpose. In the center there was an enormous reel to reel recorder.

Helms became suddenly aware that she had no idea what she was looking for. Audio equipment? Okay, she found that. What does that prove?

“Ask your questions,” the man muttered into his own chest, then twisted his head upward and loudly repeated, “ask your questions!”

“Well uh...” Helms mentally scrambled for a plan. “We really just wanted to follow up on the initial report, make sure that your neighbors haven’t uh... harassed you about the complaint or anything.”

“The idiots? No, no the idiots have left me alone. I bought the headphones, see?” Again the man wrenched his head skyward and repeated “the headphones!”

He rattled a set of over-the-ear cans attached to a long wire leading all the way back to the bedroom full of electronics.

“So uh...you mind if I ask what all the equipment is for?”

“Hmm?” The man’s face bunched up and he blinked at Helms. “Why do you need to know? Not a crime to have this equipment. Not a crime!”

“No, of course not,” Helms said, and put on her harmless smile again. “It’s just that my nephew, he’s uh... he’s really into A/V stuff and I’m trying to... y’know, connect with him more.”

Damn. Helms felt her credibility slipping away by the second.

“Okay...” The man said, dragging the syllables out. He thought for a second, then continued. “I’ll show you! I’ll show you!”

The man set his headphones down on the bench and shuffled past Helms. They both had to turn sideways to let him pass. Helms tightened her grip on her pistol while he did. He stooped in front of the equipment and fiddled with something in the bottom-most stacks. Then he flipped a few switches on the receiver, and yanked the headphone cord out of its plug. He turned around and smiled at Helms, and she instantly knew she’d tipped him off somehow. She took a reflexive step backward to put some distance between the two of them, but her heel thumped against the far wall of the trailer.

Nowhere to go.

The man hit play. There was only static at first, gentle pops and clicks as a recording spooled up. Then it opened with a deep bass, almost too low to hear. The thin walls of the caravan shuddered with it. A high ululating squeal, then a wildly oscillating tone that dove up and down through the registers. Quickly the sound filled out with too many atmospheric squeaks and whistles to track. Helms felt something behind her eyeballs pop, and a sucking vertigo pulled the floor of the trailer away from her. She stumbled, but put a hand on the kitchenette’s sticky counter and steadied herself. The

recording stopped, and for a moment Helms wondered if it had truly gone quiet, or if she'd just gone deaf.

The man peered back at her from the far end of the trailer. His eyes burned with focused curiosity. He was expecting something.

When the vertigo passed and she popped her ears a few times, she felt normal again.

“That was...weird,” Helms said.

The man smiled slowly, his thin, dry lips cracking from the effort.

“Interesting,” he said, then looked to the roof and barked “interesting!”

“So what was all that ab-” Helms began, but the man cut her off.

“I wonder,” he said. He did a little hop and then scuttled toward her. He stood a few inches shorter than Helms, squinting up into her eyes and inclining his head to get all the different angles. “I wonder which you are, then, hmm?”

He reached up to touch Helms' eye, but she slapped his hand away with her right while pushing him back to arm's length with her left. Then hand to pistol again, ready position.

“Not a Manic,” the man continued, unfazed. “This close to a filtered hi-fi source and you'd be clawing at the walls by now.”

“What the hell are you on about?” Helms said.

“A Sleeper then? Could be,” he clapped his hands hard.

Helms jumped. She pulled her revolver out from its holster a fraction of an inch.

“No,” the man shook his head. “The reflexes would be fading by now. You could be one of the other frequencies – I haven’t identified them all. Wouldn’t that be exciting? Exciting!”

“Sir, I’m going to need you to come with me. I have some questions for you in regards to a series of attacks around town that I-“

“How’s your heart rate?” The man asked, ignoring her. “Your breathing? Your vision? Are you hearing voices, having sudden unexplainable urges? What do you taste? You have to tell me, quick! Quick! The changes might render you unable to speak.”

“What changes? Sir, you’re not making any sense. If you’d just gather your uh...audio materials and... and accompany me back to the station, I’m sure we can get all of this-”

“Oh,” the man looked crestfallen. “Oh that’s it. Just another carrier. How disappointing.”

“Sir, I’m going to ask you one more time to gather your recordings and come with me to the station, or I will have to detain you.”

“Of course,” the man giggled, “of course! Just a moment.”

He shuffled to the far end of the trailer and poked around at his audio equipment. He turned back to Helms.

“I just have one question for you: What would you do if I erased this recording right now?”

“Sir?” Helms said, her patience wearing, “that is evidence to be used in a possible criminal investigation...”

“I understand,” the man nodded. His finger hovered over a button on the central console. “I’m going to erase it now.”

“I’ll fucking kill you!” Helms had her pistol out and trained on the man’s face in the span of a heartbeat.

“Yes, yes. There it is. The carrier wave doing its work. Not your fault of course – the carrier wave is the strongest frequency. It has by far the most adherents. Not the most interesting effects, of course, but it makes sense. The signal needs to spread. I can’t cast aspersions on you – no shame in it. No shame! It took me years to figure out that my own research wasn’t on my initiative. I’m susceptible to the carrier wave, myself. You’re in good company!”

The man started to fiddle with the audio equipment again, and Helms had to bite into her own cheek to keep her finger from slipping past the guard and onto the trigger.

“Don’t worry – I would never erase the signal. I couldn’t if I wanted to! No more than you could, either, now that you’ve heard it. There’s a nest of messages in the signal, you see, each with different effects: The Manics are boring. They just attack, attack, attack. The Sleepers are more interesting: I’m just beginning to study them in depth. There seem to be some genuine changes in physiology there, not least of which is the seeming suspension of autonomic functions, presumably to conserve the energy they then release in sudden, intense bursts that transcend typical human abilities. I’ve been able to identify two more frequencies so far as well, but who knows? There could be more. More!”

The man flipped a series of switches and the reel to reel to spun up. He bent down and hit a button on a cassette player nestled beneath the mattress, and tapped his foot while he waited.

“What...what did you do to me?” Helms said.

As soon as the man had admitted he had no intention of erasing the signal, the anxiety slipped away and she was able to lower her weapon. She felt the first itchy pinpricks of sweat springing out on her forehead. There was a tightness in her chest, and a building energy crackling up and down her

spine. She felt like she would explode if she didn't do something, but she couldn't for the life of her think of what that might be.

“Me? Nothing. I don't *do* anything. I am only a messenger. Like you are, now. See, there is such a thing as a disease that is *too* fatal. It will kill it's victims long before they have the opportunity to infect others. It's the same with this signal. The same!” He turned his head to the roof and barked “same! Same! Same!”

He composed himself with some effort, and continued: “If everybody turned Manic, or Sleeper, who would be left to spread the signal? That's where the carriers come in. You hear the signal, but you get to stay yourself: You are allowed to retain your knowledge, your abilities, and your memories. But there's a price: Once you hear the carrier wave, all you want to do is play it for others, over and over again, forever. I didn't realize that at first. Not at first! I'm a man of science, understand. When we initially recorded that signal back at SETI, I thought that I kept replaying it because it was *interesting*. Then I showed others -- just to get their input, I told myself. The others...changed.”

The man fell quiet then. He made a fist, clenched it, then sighed and slowly released it.

“I knew it was the signal, but I kept playing it. For science, I told myself! To understand its effects! But that wasn't it. I was just a pawn, myself. I'm still trying to learn about it, of course. Maybe even one day stop it? But then the urge gets too much, too strong, and I have to go out there. Out with the idiots. And I *have* to play it for them. It will kill you, if you don't. Here.”

The reels clicked to a stop, and the man ejected a cassette from the deck. He rummaged around in an overhead bin and came out with a small tape recorder. He slotted the tape into it and held it out for Helms.

“You'll need it soon,” he said. “Normally the signal takes some time to work, but I've filtered out the noise and boosted the frequencies on the master source here. It'll be taking hold soon. Find somebody to listen, or it will tear you apart. I don't do this for everybody, you know. I don't want the

signal to spread any further than it has to, so I just leave most of the carriers without a way to relay the signal. It's...not pretty what happens to them. But it's better for all of us, in the long run. Better than letting them spread it. You seem different somehow. Plus, you have the gun – if I tried to kick you out of here without a way play the signal, I bet you'd gun me down, wouldn't you? Wouldn't you! Ha ha!”

Helms was about to tell the man what he could do with his tape, but was surprised to find that she'd already accepted it.

“I'm not going to-” she started to say, but that energy in her spine was still building. She wanted to laugh, scream, dance, run somewhere or punch something or maybe just weep uncontrollably. The caravan was becoming painfully claustrophobic.

The man smiled at her. Nothing mischievous or sinister in the gesture this time. Just understanding and empathy. He motioned her towards the door, and she bolted out of it, tripping down the steps and sprawling in the gravel driveway. The recorder went spinning out of her hands. She frantically crawled over to it and checked its integrity. It looked intact. She hit play, and heard the first bass tones crackle out of the tinny speakers.

She sobbed with relief.

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Helms had been sitting in her cruiser in the station parking lot for fifteen minutes. Her fingertips dug into the soft leather grips of the steering wheel. She ground her teeth together so tightly that she could taste the chalky dust of enamel. Tears filled her eyes, blurred her vision, lending the external spotlights little unfocused halos.

Beside her, the tape recorder sat on the central console. She shivered uncontrollably. She thought about her pistol, buttoned into her holster. She thought about how it might taste. But every time her hand moved down for it, it started drifting toward the recorder instead.

The back door to the station opened, and a figure stepped out. Large and male, she could tell by the silhouette, but the details were lost behind her haze of tears. The figure peered toward the cruiser, ducked its head and shielded its eyes against the light.

‘No, please,’ Helms thought. ‘Just walk away.’

The figure approached the passenger side of the cruiser. Helms heard the thunk of a handle being lifted, and the interior lights flicked on. She kept her eyes locked straight ahead. Her hands on the wheel. She felt the car shift as the man’s weight settled in beside her. The door closed.

The man grunted, cleared his throat with some difficulty, and croaked “what’s going on, Helms?”

She didn’t respond.

“Helms?” He tried again.

Price reached over and set his hand on her shoulder. The contact broke everything. Her resolve crumbled. Her shaky hand pried its nails from the wheel, and began moving downward of its own accord.

“I’m sorry, Price,” her voice cracked. “It’s not me.”

He watched with some confusion as she picked up the tape recorder, and pressed play.

A few opening notes of static, a deep, almost imperceptible bass, and a screaming whistle that danced wildly through the registers.