

It's just after midnight. You're sitting in the driver's seat of your car at a gas station several miles outside of town.

"Dude, are you done yet?" you yell out of your open passenger-side window.

"Man, chill. I had to go inside and pay. This machine is acting stupid," he replies.

Moments later, you hear the sound of the gas handle returning to the pump. You start the car and see the needle has barely moved from the one-quarter mark and has not quite reached the halfway mark. Dave opens the passenger side door, hops in, puts on his seat belt, and opens the candy bar he must have purchased inside.

"That's it?" you ask.

"It's cool," Dave reaches into his pocket and pulls out another candy bar, "I got you one too. I just figured you'd wanna wait since you're driving."

You close your eyes and take a deep breath. You count down from five to give Dave the impression that you're more annoyed than you actually are. "Are you half-dumb or half stupid?" You try hard to hold back your laughter. "I wasn't talking about the candy bar, but is that all the gas you're putting in?"

"Man, chill. Look, my direct deposit is late. I called my boss before we left and they fixed it, but the rest of my money won't hit the bank 'til 6 tomorrow. We're good and I'll fill it tomorrow. Is that cool?"

You roll your eyes. "Yeah, man." You grab your candy bar. "Should have just said something." You open your candy bar and take a bite. You realize it's been a while since you two stopped off and got burgers from the drive-thru. With a mouth full of candy you say, "You're lucky I love peanuts."

Dave chuckles, "What was that?"

You pause. Realizing what Dave heard and his inability to pass up a dirty pun, you opt to not repeat yourself. You look over at Dave grinning ear-to-ear impatiently waiting for you to give him the comedic ball for him to run away with when everything around you goes dark.

In the darkness, you see something coming out of the station waving a flashlight. "It's a blackout," the attendant yells, "Store's closed. Be careful. Seems to be out all the way to town."

“See, I knew we shouldn’t have stopped in the middle of nowhere,” Dave complains, probably more upset that you didn’t let him finish his joke than anything else.

You roll down your window for fresh air and look around to see a whole hell lot of nothing. The gas station was the only source of light when you pulled in and now the couple of cars that were here, including that of the attendant that just locked up the store, got into the pickup truck that was parked by the door, and drove away back the way you came. As the truck drives further and further, your headlights appear to be the only light for miles. No street pole, building, house, car, or anything illuminated anywhere.

“Again, if you’d just filled the tan..., you know what? Let’s just go.” You put your car into gear and drive off down the pitch-black road.

You’ve been driving for about an hour or so looking for a sign of anything. No cars. No road signs. No street lights. Not even the poles the street lights would otherwise be on. Just darkness. Only your high beams. You’re not even sure if you’re on the same road or even in the same state at this point. Your co-pilot has been asleep for a good 20 minutes resting for his turn behind the wheel.

The road starts to widen a bit. You’re coming to an unsuspected fork in the road. The last time you glanced at a map, this should have been a straight shot through the desert. You slow the car to a stop with the fork just in view. You put the car in park and pull your phone out of your pocket to check the map, but there’s nothing close to a signal that your phone can pick up. You see Dave has his phone in his lap. You reach for it, but it’s locked.

“Hey, Dave, wake up. Unlock your phone.”

Dave doesn’t move.

You speak a bit louder, shaking Dave’s shoulder, “Dave! Yo, unlock your phone.”

Doesn’t budge.

You look through the windshield for some sort of sign that would help you determine which way to go when you hear the sound of bells coming from outside. Even though the volume was almost all the way down so Dave could sleep, you turn it off so you can see better.

Jingle. Jingle. Jingle.

From the left side of the fork, a large man, standing at least seven feet tall, steps into the light of your high beams wearing a large fur coat that is drug on the ground with feet to spare and what appears to be a hundred small bells attached to it. The man had long hair that seemed to have woven itself into the coat blurring the lines where the hair ended and the fur coat began. His face looked weathered by the desert sun as did the skin on his hand, which now that you've noticed, seems to be dragging something. Something like...

...it's a hammer. It's a long wooden hammer; more like a mallet. Yes, it's a mallet.

By now, the man with the mallet is standing directly in front of the car staring at you through the windshield. Your eyes are locked on to his despite the fact you can barely see his eyes through the hair covering his face. You reach your arm over to Dave, grabbing his arm and shaking him aggressively. Nothing. You think to yourself, *What did this guy take? A horse tranquilizer?!*

Still staring at the man standing only five or so feet in front of the car, you notice that the man is murmuring something. You can't make out what he's saying until you see the whites of his eyes hide away behind his eyelids and his lips form the word FIVE.

Then FOUR.

THREE.

All of your fear feels centered in your chest as your heart pounds hard enough to escape the confines of your chest to run away and leave you here to deal with the man.

TWO.

You reach and grab hold of Dave's hair. You're pulling and tugging at his hair, damn near ripping it from his scalp. Just now you realize you do have a voice.

"Dave."

ONE.

"Dave!"

The man in the fur coat takes an exaggerated deep breath and grips the mallet with both hands.

INHALE.

“DAVE!!!”

EXHALE.

“DAVEEEE!!!!”

SMASH!

The man in the fur coat smashes his giant mallet into the front of your car, knocking out one of your headlights. The loud sound was finally enough to wake Dave from his unconscious impression of a boulder. Dave screams three times - once when he was awakened suddenly by the loud crash, the second time when he saw the man in the fur coat in front of the car, and a third time when he notices that you are still pulling his hair out.

You let go of Dave’s hair.

The man in the bell coat begins to walk toward your open window. You lock the door and roll the window up but even through the glass, you hear the man speak to you with what sounds like a warning, “The desert will hold your souls.”

“Dude, why are you still here?” Dave asked.

“What?” you ask back.

“Drive away!”

“Oh!” You were so bewildered that you forgot that driving away was an option. You throw the car back into drive and speed down the right turn of the fork, the opposite way the man came from. You look in your rearview mirror but see nothing but black though you believe you can still hear the sound of the bells fading away in the distance.

You and Dave sit in silence for a solid half hour. Eyes forward you’re both wide awake and terrified. Time has seemingly stopped for you; the world feels like it’s standing still. Lost in your own head, all you can think about is the sound of those bells. The sound of the aged brass against the fur making the dull ringing that is now replacing any thought you try to form. You can barely hear yourself breathe. You hear only the bells.

“What the hell was that?!” Dave is finally able to speak. “Like, seriously, what the hell was that?”

You're at a loss for words, but you try. "I don't know, man. I was driving and I stopped and I tried to wake you and then he was just right there. I mean-"

You can't finish your sentence. You can't finish your thoughts. Your mind is filled with the dull ringing of bells and with each passing second, the bells seem to get louder and louder. You look over at Dave who hasn't moved an inch, eyes still forward, looking for something. Town, maybe? Light other than that of our lone headlight? Whatever it was, with his eyes as wide as his skull would allow, he's found it.

You look ahead and slam on the brakes causing the car to fishtail a bit. Before you is another fork in the road and standing at the center of it is the man in the fur coat.

"What the hell, man?!" Dave asks.

The man can be heard yelling, "The desert will hold your souls! The desert will hold your souls! The desert will hold your soul!"

The man closed his eyes and started mouthing words again.

"What's he doing?" Dave asks.

"He's counting down. He did this last time," you tell him.

"What happens when he gets to one?"

"Nothing this time." You see the man get to five and you drive away down the road behind him before he has a chance to take out your other headlight.

You drive for a few minutes before Dave is tapping on your arm. "Jacob, man, pull over!"

Reluctantly, you start to pull over, but Dave is out of the car before it stops. He runs across the road and gets sick by a rock. You get out of the car, leaving the engine running, and check on Dave.

You kneel at this side, placing a hand on his shoulder, "Man, you okay?"

He aggressively pushes your hand away, knocking you slightly off balance. "Of course, I'm not okay, Jacob! Why would I be okay? What part of any of this is okay?!"

Dave continues to yell at you, but all you can hear are bells. Lots of bells. Getting louder. Getting closer.

“We gotta go, Dave. Can you hear that?”

“Hear what?”

“The bells, dude! We gotta go! He’s coming!”

“The desert will hold your souls.”

You and Dave turn around just in time to see the man in the fur coat smash your only working headlight and also your only viable source of light. You and Dave scramble to your feet in time to see the man smash his mallet into the open passenger door, knocking it clean off the car. Then you hear the man shatter your windshield. Under only the moonlight, you see the man turn and begin walking toward you, bells jingling with every movement.

You take a few steps backward, putting some space between you and the man’s mallet. You pull Dave in close and whisper in his ear, “Listen, on three, go left and circle back to the car. It should still be running.” Dave nods, and you begin counting.

“One.”

“You can’t escape, Jacob. The desert will hold your soul.”

You freeze in place at the sound of your name.

Dave gives you a heavy shove, “Three, dammit! Go!”

You run wide to the right as Dave runs wide to the left. You hear the bells jingle and the mallet drag as the man turns around, watching you get away. You both make it to the car. You slam the gas pedal to the floor and speed away, only making it about fifty feet before you crash into road construction signs that had been surrounding a giant hole; a hole that you are now falling down.

Glass, rocks, and dirt start to pour into the car as you fall endlessly down this hole. You hear screaming, crashing, banging, ringing... ringing...ringing...

...then you stop moving.

There's no car. No crashing. No glass. You've just woken up laying on your back, the warm desert air replacing a blanket. Your eyes are open but you see nothing. You try to wipe your eyes, but can't, your hands are bound by what feels like small bits of plastic - zip ties! Your feet are also bound together, likely also by zip ties. You can feel a scratchy fabric on your face. You're blindfolded. That's why you can't see. This is when the pain hits you. A throbbing pain coming from all over your body, primarily your head. The sensation of heat comes from your limbs. Scratches or cuts, maybe? You have no way of knowing what's wrong, where you are, or what happened that got you here.

What you do know are the sounds you can hear. First the sound of screaming and crying in the distance. It sounds like Dave, but he sounds so far away that it's unclear if that's him or the wailing of some dying desert animal.

And second, the now unmistakable sound of shuffling feet and hundreds of jingling bells. The jingling of dull bells, muffled slightly by assumably a huge fur coat, gets louder and closer.

Louder.

Closer.

Until the sound is right above you.

"I told you," the voice said, "the desert would hold your soul. You will never escape, Jacob."

Without even thinking about it, you try to scream as loudly as you can, only to end up with a mouth full of dirt. You try to spit it out, but you can't as more and more dirt fills your mouth and begins to cover your face. Seconds pass, more dirt. More time passes, more dirt. Your nose is covered and you find it increasingly hard to breathe as your panic subsides with acceptance of your fate. Your ears become covered as you slowly begin to slip into non-existence, your final thought - the ringing of bells.

Your End.