

# TUESDAYS

Suzanne Palmer

**Back while she was in college, Suzanne worked many odd jobs to make ends meet, from cashier at a fast-food Chinese restaurant to perforated paper edge-remover to overnight convenience-store clerk. There is something about the slow, grinding hours before dawn that draws out the most interesting (and sometimes most alarming) people, and there are endless stories to be found if you're brave or desperate or lucky enough to be out among them.**

3:36 A.M.: Kent / Paulson

The police cruiser is just another set of headlights in the slow stream moving across the flat, featureless dark of an invisible highway, until it peels off from the shifting pack, growing brighter and larger as it leaves I-10 for the dusty off-ramp that serves the diner, an out-of-business gas station, and a vast unmarked wasteland of jackrabbit shit.

Even before it rolls to a gravel-crunching stop just at the edge of the bright neon light, the ambivalence of the two officers within is apparent. No flashing lights or sirens, no leaping out with guns drawn to confront the confrontable. Nor are they responding to a done-deal tragedy, another faceless out-of-stater whose attention has been slowly worn down by the monotony of the night road until their car unexpectedly intersects with one of the road's few, but surprisingly hittable, utility poles. There are no bodies, no official phone calls to be made. And at least—or perhaps at most—here there is coffee in plentiful and strong supply.

Officer Kent (young, not yet jaded, still thinking about criminals with anticipation) and Officer Paulson (older, less pleased about overnight shifts, the polyester content in the new uniform shirts, and the aging of his knees) get out of their cruiser, one on each side, and stand there looking over the parking lot, seeking advance warning on what waits inside:

- One tractor-trailer.
- A blue pickup that belongs to one of the diner's waitresses.
- A white Saab.
- A silver Honda sedan.

\* \* \*

"Divide and conquer?" Kent asks.

"Just the basics, then we're out. This should take one cup of coffee at the most," Paulson answers, before his eyes find the black luxury tour bus parked off in the

shadows. It is undecorated except for a crucifix, on which is suspended a pair of men's briefs, painted on the rear. "Make that two cups."

"Do you think we should take notes?"

Paulson laughs, and it still has some warmth in it where bitterness has not eroded it away. "You sure should, 'cause I'm going to make you type the report anyway."

\* \* \*

3:42 A.M.: Mason

"Yes, Officer, I was the one who called," the man says. "I must have panicked."

Kent is sitting across from the man, one elbow on the cracked formica tabletop, pen poised and waiting for him to say something worthwhile. For his part, the man is thinking he's not sure he *can*, not at this hour, not way out in this godforsaken dump in the middle of nowhere with nothing for company but the intermittent hum of traffic. They both know with fair certainty what is going through each other's minds.

"You seem fairly levelheaded now, Mr. . . ." Kent checks his notes so far. "Mr. Mason. Can you explain what happened?"

Mason sighs, putting his hands over his face and rubbing at his eyes, wishing he were sound asleep somewhere other than here. "I stopped off to use the restroom and get some coffee and a donut, for the road, when that lady started screaming." He points at the tall brunette leaning against the counter, her faux animal-print coat pulled tight around her, talking to Paulson.

\* \* \*

3:44 A.M.: Woods

The tall brunette is thinking: *I can see you, you jerk in your khaki pants and bald spot and little business tie pointing at me as you talk to the other cop, eyeing me like I'm trash, like this is somehow my doing.*

"And that was one 'r,' two 't's?" Paulson asks.

"Lo-RETT-Ah," she says, making each syllable a stab in the air between them. "Ain't that many different ways to spell it. Loretta Woods. Got it?" Her hands flutter near the pockets on her coat, that spastic body language of a smoker momentarily thwarted. *Just my luck*, she thinks, *I only peeled the Hello My Name Is sticker off my shirt a few hours ago. If I'd known I was going to be interrogated, I could have kept it on.*

\* \* \*

3:44 A.M.: Thompson

Lilly dries her hands on her apron, puts the newly cleaned pot up under the business end of the coffee maker, and having already set up the filter and grounds, starts it brewing. She can see there's going to be demand.

\* \* \*

3:44 A.M.: Mason

"She was out in the parking lot, and a bunch of us ran out to see what was wrong."

"And this was . . . ?" Kent taps his watch.

"Around three," Mason says. "I don't know exactly. Maybe a little before that."

"Who else went out?"

"That guy," Mason says, pointing again, this time at a man with a beer gut so large Kent wondered he didn't have to travel with a wheelbarrow to get himself around. Stains on his shirt, dirty jeans, baseball cap with the name of some other diner on it. The man hovered near the woman who'd screamed, who seemed to be giving Paulson attitude.

*Truck driver*, Kent thinks of the man, and the woman: *Hooker*. He's still new enough that that snap judgment seems unkind.

\* \* \*

### 2:09 A.M.: Woods

The white Saab pulls into the diner parking lot. The place had been a pinprick of light on the horizon, steadily growing closer, until it seemed like some sort of beckoning star. Now that she is here, she notes the dust-scored chrome, the 24-Hours sign in cheap neon, the interior a light blue that looks like it dates back to the fifties and has lived hard every year on its way to the present. She puts her face in her hands and cries in heaving, soundless sobs, the gentle ticking of her engine filling the hot night air, as she thinks in slowly tightening circles about the pervasive disappointment that is her life.

She hasn't decided if she's going in yet, or just leaving, or where she'll go, when the headlights appear behind her. She looks up through bleary eyes to see a giant black bus pull into the lot and park beside the diner. The bus is nearly as large as the little bright building, as if maybe next the diner itself could drive off and leave the bus in its place. The idea makes her smile. Wiping at her eyes, she checks her face in the mirror, does her best to hide the remnants of the breakdown written there, and decides that, at the very least, she should go into the diner for a pee.

\* \* \*

### 3:47 A.M.: Mason

"I was heading for Las Cruces hoping to find a motel," Mason says, grateful for the officer's question and a chance to refocus his thoughts. "My mother's in a home in Pecos, and my brother called me to tell me she'd fallen and maybe broken a hip. I'm hoping to get there sometime later tomorrow—today, I guess. My brother's a good guy, but he—"

"Let's go back to the events here," Kent interrupts.

Mason takes a deep breath, thinks now about how he never did get his coffee. "She screamed, we ran out," he says. "They were looking up at the sky. So I looked up too, and there it was."

\* \* \*

### 3:45 A.M.: Woods

She's thinking, *he still keeps looking over here. He saw it too—but I bet he'll lie. People like him don't want anything to rock their cozy little world.*

*Bet he says it was a helicopter.*

"So tell me again, why did you go outside?" Paulson asks.

"Went out for a smoke," Loretta says. "Get some fresh air. You know?"

"You went by yourself?"

She shakes her head. "No. I was with Carl."

\* \* \*

3:58 A.M.: Fredricks

“It was un-fucking-believable,” the truck driver says for the fifth time in a row. *Doesn't matter*, he thinks, *it was*. “When that woman started screeching like it was the end of the world, I figured that rock-band guy was grabbing her ass or something, you know? But then I get out there, and it’s like, Holy shit! Big fucking thing, right here. Right *here!* Bet you guys wish you coulda seen it!”

“Can you describe it, Mr. Fredricks?” Paulson asks.

\* \* \*

3:48 A.M.: Mason

“Can you describe it?” Kent asks.

“Not really. It was really big. I mean, *big.*”

\* \* \*

3:42 A.M.: Greene

Carl doesn’t notice the police cruiser at first, thinks it must not have been running its lights when it arrived. It’s only as he’s standing out by the front of the bus, talking to the driver about routes and traffic and times that he can see the officers clearly through the giant plate glass that makes up the entire front façade of the diner, talking to customers.

“Shit,” he says.

He goes back into the bus, rousts a few groggy-eyed roadies, and points them emphatically toward the bus’s small bathroom. AJ is sound asleep, doesn’t wake up to fairly insistent—almost violent—attempts to disturb him, so at last Carl just rolls him over, pats him down, and as soon as the roadies are done he goes into the bathroom and flushes down everything he found that he knows is bad, and some stuff he just plain doesn’t know what it is.

The roadies aren’t happy with him, but he thinks, *fuck them*. His job is to get them to the next gig, alive and not in jail, and everyone knows it.

Carl is ready by the time Paulson knocks on the bus door.

\* \* \*

2:38 A.M.: Mason

He’s gripping the steering wheel of his Honda so hard there’s sweat under his fingers, thinking about his mother, wishing he was there already, not trusting Ed to do or say the right thing, stay on top of things, make sure Mom had what she needed.

He wishes he knew how bad the fall was. *What if. . . ?*

He pounds on the steering wheel with one hand, furious to the point of rage, rage at himself, for letting that thought sneak in there. Not: *What if Mother is dead?* but the damnable *If Mother is already dead, I won't have to sit with her and watch her die.*

Oncoming headlights seem off until he realizes he’s drifted across the line. Jerking the wheel back onto his own side of the road, his heart pounds in his chest. *I need a break*, he thinks, and then he sees up ahead a lone light not moving, not a car.

*Please oh please*, he thinks, *let it be somewhere open, where there are people.*

\* \* \*

3:59 A.M.: Fredricks

"There weren't blinky lights, like in the movies," Fredricks says, "but it was big. Really fucking big."

Paulson holds up his pad so the truck driver can see he's already written down "BIG," and underlined it twice. "I've got 'big,'" he says. "Can you describe anything *else* about it, sir?"

\* \* \*

12:01 A.M.: Thompson

Barb barely mumbles a goodbye on her way out, Linda already gone minutes ahead of her. Lilly is alone in the diner now except for Frank in the back, who is already sound asleep in his small office, bicycle in the doorway, feet up on his desk, papers spread across his wide chest as if somehow he can absorb the news. If it gets busy, she can wake him up to help her cook, but it won't get busy, never does, not until the distant early dregs of dawn begin to seep up over the far horizon.

The jukebox winds down into its own slumber, its final song played and no one feeding it more quarters. Lilly likes the sounds of the diner at night, doesn't miss the relentless, repetitive, muffled beat of the jukebox. There's plenty of pie left. Coffee is low, so she dumps out the last bit, boiled down nearly to tar, and carefully rinses out the glass carafe. Setting it upside-down to dry beside the sink, she gets a new filter out, a packet of pre-measured grounds, to wait on the counter beside her until headlights appear, if they do, and turn toward her. Then she'll have the coffee fresh, which is the only way it should ever be.

She looks up at the clock, and the free truck-parts-company calendar beside it. It's Tuesday. Eventually she won't be alone.

\* \* \*

2:25 A.M.: Fredricks

He's tired, sick of the road, sick of the junk food wrappers cluttering the seat beside him. He doesn't realize how thirsty he is, for something hot and bitter and full of caffeine, until he sees the diner in the distance up ahead. He's been here before: a quiet place, good coffee, no hassles.

He slows his rig, pulls off when the ramp finally appears out of the night ahead of him. At the diner he parks it facing out again, looking back at the endless road—some sort of perpetual penance for his sins—and hops down from the cab. His legs are stiff, aching, but he walks his rig, checks it over, checks the rear doors to make sure they're secure, throws a chock under a tire before he tucks in his shirt and heads into the diner for a brief respite from the drone of the asphalt.

\* \* \*

3:48 A.M.: Mason

"It made noise, like . . . I don't know. Like pebbles rolling down a hill, maybe, a whole avalanche of pebbles, except *musical*. It was hard to hear, because that woman wouldn't stop screaming," Mason adds. "It wasn't there for very long, and then it was just gone, like in a blink. I know we're not that far off from White

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Sands, so I figure it's something of theirs. Better them than Roswell, right? Was that what it was?"

"I can't answer that, sir."

\* \* \*

**3:46 A.M.: Woods**

"Who's Carl?"

"The guy from the bus."

"Oh," Paulson says. "We'll be talking to him too."

*As if what, he's gonna say no, he didn't go out for a smoke with me?* The woman thinks. *This is such a crock of shit. I bet if I hadn't worn this stupid old coat, no one here'd be eyeballing me like I'm something filthy that crawled up out of a hole in the ground. I should have thrown it out years ago, but noooo, I had to hang onto it for the goddamned reunion.* She just wants to get out of the thing, put it in the first Salvation Army bin she passes so she'll never have to look at it in her closet again, never be reminded of how she's wasted the last twenty-five years.

She's passed wanting a smoke a long time ago, and now just wants a drink, or two, or five. "Are we done yet?" she asks.

"Can you describe what you saw?"

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**4:01 A.M.: Fredricks**

"It made a sound," the trucker says. "Like if you was humming the national anthem or something, but while chewing on ice cubes. That make any sense?"

"I'm sure I have no opinion, sir," Paulson says, though that's not even slightly true. "Was there anything else?"

"It took off real fast, just like that." Fredricks snaps his fingers. "Didn't land. Wouldn't that have been a hoot, a bunch of fucking aliens coming down for pie? But they didn't. I always wanted to see an alien. Did I mention how big the damned thing was?"

\* \* \*

**3:50 A.M.: Mason**

"The Roswell crack, that was a joke. I don't believe in that kind of thing, of course. Can I get some more coffee now?"

\* \* \*

**4:02 A.M.: Fredricks**

Paulson closes his notebook, takes a deep breath. "I think we've got everything we can from you, Mr. Fredricks. I think you can go."

"If you don't think you need me. . . ."

"I'm sure."

"Well, okay then. You got my name and number, right? You'll call if you have questions? Or if you catch 'em or something or the Air Force shoots them down and they crash? I want to know if they're gonna crash, because that thing was *big*."

"We'll do our best, sir," Paulson says.

Fredricks adjusts his cap, shakes the officer's hand, and walks out. He can feel the eyes of the woman and the little nerdy guy who called 911 on his back, but

when he glances over his shoulder the officers are looking at each other. *Glad to see the last of me*, he thinks. *Good. Aliens in the sky or not, I've got fourteen of 'em fresh over the border from Juarez in the back of my truck waiting to get to Tucson, and last thing I need is to get held up so long the police get bored enough to search my trailer.*

He looks up at the sky, though, as he pulls the chock out from behind his tire and climbs up into his cab. *Damnedest thing.* The officer he'd talked to is just knocking on the door of the tour bus as he pulls out of the gravel parking lot and picks up speed to merge back onto the highway, more on his mind than he'd expected from a simple pit stop in the middle of nowhere.

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#### 4:06 A.M.: Greene

"Officer," The man says, holding the bus door open but not moving out of the way.

"Are you Carl?" Paulson asks.

"I am."

"Are you the driver?"

"I'm the manager."

"Manager of?"

"The band." At his look of incomprehension, Carl gestures back into the bus. "Actual Jesus and the Water-Walkers," he says. "Have you heard of us?"

Paulson makes a face, realizes he is making a face, and does his best to stop. "Yeah, I have. What are you doing out here?"

"Stopped for a few hours so our driver could catch a nap," Carl says. "We tend to pull off in out of the way places where we won't be so noticeable. Fans, you know. Some of them can be a little crazy."

"My son," Paulson says, carefully, "brought home a DVD of some of your videos once."

"It's just business, you understand? Controversy sells. It's not—"

". . . Carl?" Someone calls groggily from the back. Paulson sees Carl wince, and waits with some curiosity as the caller stumbles forward toward the door.

\* \* \*

#### 4:07 A.M.: Greene / "Actual Jesus"

AJ stumbles toward the door, his blood-red knee-length shirt and the brocade vest on top of it both gaping wide open. No pants. No underwear. He pats his chest where his pocket would have been if his shirt had been buttoned. "Have you seen . . . ?"

He stops and stares at the officer, frozen in place if you don't count swaying and twitching, his bloodshot eyes with their teeny tiny pupils wide open.

"You'll have to pardon him," Carl says, smoothly. "It's been a long night on the road and he hasn't had much sleep."

"Not much sleep," AJ echoes.

"He's going back to bed now," Carl says.

"Going back to bed now," AJ says, and takes a step backward, stumbling against a seat.

"And he's going to put his fucking pants back on," Carl adds, with emphasis.

AJ flashes his manager the middle finger, then another to Paulson for good luck, takes another step backward and falls over.

"Why don't I come out and talk?" Carl says.

"That seems for the best, sir," Paulson says.

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3:49 A.M.: Woods

"I don't know what I saw," Loretta says. She's too tired, doesn't want to go straight from the middle-aged nobody in the zebra-stripe coat and too much makeup to the crazy woman who thinks she saw a UFO. No one else was going to be dumb enough to tell the truth, not to friends or family, much less to two bored police officers who probably got the night shift by being dirty cops.

She glances over at the guy who called the police in the first place, the officer he was talking to now done with him and moved on to the trucker, the too-skinny waitress with her cheap bleach-job hair in a fraying ponytail pouring him coffee, smiling, as if she could possibly care about anything in this isolated hellhole.

*No one tells the truth*, she thinks.

"It was probably a helicopter," she says at last. "A really big helicopter. Can I leave now?"

\* \* \*

4:09 A.M.: Greene

Carl steps out into the muggy night air and lets the bus door shut behind him.

"Can you tell me what happened?" Paulson asks. He's thinking about warrants, thinking about his name in the papers, thinking about how much time the bus occupants have already had to make sure he wouldn't find anything.

"As I said, we stopped here to let the driver catch some zees. I went in to get coffee for the crew, then I went back into the diner to talk to the woman in the zebra coat. At first I thought she was . . . well, you know. It's been a long tour. But she wasn't, and we had a nice talk, and we both wanted a smoke, so we stepped out. Talked for a bit, then there was this weird sound and we both looked up and there it was."

"What, sir?"

"The UFO."

"Ms. Woods expressed the opinion that it was a helicopter."

Carl laughs and shakes his head. "Yeah, I can believe that."

"That it was a helicopter?"

"Oh, no, just that she'd say that."

"And had you been drinking, prior to this incident?"

He laughs again. "I have six rock musicians, an equal number of groupies, four roadies, and a fucking tattooed squirrel monkey up on that bus," he says, "and it's my responsibility to keep them all together and able to put on a show. I don't do anything stronger than coffee while I'm on tour. The moment this tour's over, though, you can bet your ass I'm going to drink until I'm lying flat on the floor and hallucinating UFOs everywhere I look. But tonight, it was the real deal."

"Can you describe what it looked like?"

"It was big."

The officer sighs. "Other than big."

"It made a sound," Carl says.

"Can you describe it?"

"Ever put a harmonica in a blender?"

"No."

"Then no, I can't describe it," he says. "Will that be all?"

In the absence of probable cause, it is.

\* \* \*

4:28 A.M.: Kent

"Excuse me, Miss?" Kent has come back in, after watching Paulson talk to the bus people for a while, and feeling left out and bored.

Lilly has a damp cloth out and is cleaning the table where Kent had talked to Mason, who had finally slunk out of here not long after the trucker. "Name's Lilly," she says. "Three Ls, not all consecutive. Busy night tonight."

"Did you see anything?"

"The space ship." She picks up the salt shaker, twists the cap off, takes out a wadded up NutraSweet packet that someone had stuck in there sometime earlier, probably on Linda's shift.

"Did you go outside?"

"Naw, I could see it from the window," she says.

"Can you describe it at all?"

"Yeah," she says. "It's black. Hard to say how big it is because it's really big and in the dark you can't tell exactly how far up it is, but I'd say it's at least three or four hundred feet in diameter. No lights, although it does glow just a little bit, if that makes any sense. I figure it's probably just hot, maybe from going up and down through the atmosphere."

He stands, holding his pad, and blinks at her.

"I read," she adds, recognizing his expression. "Not much else to do out here. Usually dead at this time and I always get the overnight shifts because I'm the youngest. And I don't complain because I like them."

"Anything else notable about it?" Kent manages to ask.

"It makes sounds. Hard to describe," she says. "You have kids?"

"Me? No," he said.

"Married?"

". . . No."

"Handsome guy like you? Now that's a shame."

"I have a nephew."

"He have any of those musical stuffed toys, you know the ones that sing?"

"Yeah."

"Ever run one through a dryer?"

"No."

"Well, try it. That's what the space ship sounds like. Kind of." She finishes cleaning the table and fetches a broom. He has to keep stepping out of the way as she sweeps, and he gets the feeling she's deliberately making him have to dance around away from the broom.

"How is it," he asks, finally, "that you didn't go outside, and yet you can describe it better than everyone else?"

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Officer Kent—"

"No, your first name."

Kent doesn't think he should answer, but after a pause, he does. "Matt," he says.

"Well, Matt," Lilly says. "I get bored here all by myself at night. If you want to come back next Tuesday and sit for a bit and chat, I'd be happy to explain all about it."

"I don't think I'm on duty next Tuesday."

She smiles. "It's okay, come on by anyway. Free coffee. Two A.M. Is it a date?"

"Uh . . . I don't . . ." he starts to say. *She's cute, but she sees UFOs*, he thinks. "I'd like to, but I don't think it'd be appropriate."

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“Shame,” Lilly says. She sweeps some crumbs off the counter, checks the coffee pot, puts on some more decaf. Then she pours him a cup, sets it in front of him, watches him trying to decide if he should drink it. Finally he picks it up, blows at the steam, takes a tentative sip.

“‘Cause the UFO comes by here every week at the same time,” she says suddenly, and he spits coffee all down his own shirt.

She smiles, and thinks, *Tuesdays are looking up.*