It was dark when the knock at the door came. George raised his head up from the pillow and looked at the clock. It was 3:04 in the morning. There was another knock at the front door, and George sat up, swinging his legs off the bed. He slipped his feet into a pair of blue slippers and got out of bed, then shuffled out of the bedroom and to the front door. There was one more knock, just the one, a lonely sound.

“Hold on a minute, will ya?” George called out.
He flipped up the switch to turn on the porch light and looked out through the peephole. He saw the back of a man’s head. George turned to make sure the chain was secure, then peered out through the peephole again.

“Can I help you?” George asked through the door.

The man turned, and George could see his face now--plain-looking, with thick eyebrows and a little stubble.

“Actually, you can,” the man said. “I was driving home and my car broke down. I was wondering if I could use your telephone to call my brother to come and pick me up.”

“Don’t you have a cell?” George asked.

“Yeah, I do,” the man said, taking a phone out of his pocket and holding it up to the peephole. “But the battery is dead. I forgot to charge it. I’m really in a spot here. It’ll just take a minute, I swear.”

George hesitated. He wasn’t usually the paranoid type, but nothing about getting woken up out of bed at three in the morning so some stranded guy could call his brother to pick him up was “usual”. He looked through the peephole again; the guy was still standing there. The guy shook his head and turned around, starting to move away from the door.

“Hold on, don’t go,” George said.

He sighed and took the chain off the door, then threw the deadbolt and swung the door open.

“Come in,” he said.

“Thanks,” the man said, pocketing his dead cell and rubbing his hands together. “It’s a bit chilly out there.”

George closed the door behind the man.

“This way,” George said.
“Huh?”

“The phone is this way.”

“Oh, of course.”

George led the stranger to the kitchen and pointed him to the phone on the wall.

“Thanks,” the man said. “And don’t worry, it’s a local call.”

“I’ll be in the living room,” George said, and left the man to conduct his business.

George sat on the couch and turned on the TV, surfing through thirty channels of shit you couldn’t pay him to watch, and wondering--not for the first time--why he bothered paying for overpriced cable, before finally settling on a channel that showed reruns of old black and white shows from the fifties and sixties. The show on TV right then was a western. Two cowboys were conversing with a white actor painted up to look like an Indian. George didn’t recognize the show.

The man came out of the kitchen and walked into the living room, and George stood up.

“All set then?” George asked.

“Just about. Problem is my brother won’t be able to pick me up for at least half an hour, maybe a bit longer. He has to drive here all the way from Mulberry Park. I was wondering if maybe I could wait here.”

“Well…,” George hesitated. “I guess that would be fine. It’s late though.”

“I know; I’m really sorry about this. Thanks though, really. You’re a life saver.”

George laughed.

“Life saver is a bit much. Take a seat.”

George sat back down on the couch, and the man followed suit.

“My name’s Ben, by the way,” the stranded man said.
“I’m George.”

“So,” Ben said, looking around the living room, taking in the furniture, the coffee table, the little knickknacks. “Do you live here alone?”

“No. My wife took the kids to visit here parents in Highland. They’ll be back in the morning.”

“How did you get out of it?” Ben asked.

George grinned.

“I had a bad sore throat,” he said. “It must have been a twenty-four-hour sort of thing, because I feel just fine now.”

George picked up the remote and flipped through a few more channels.

“Sorry about waking you up at this time of night,” Ben said. “Thanks for being cool about it.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

George settled on a *M*A*S*H* rerun. The two men watched the show in relative silence punctuated by a few laughs. When the episode ended another one started; it was one of the more serious episodes that George had never been a big fan of, but he didn’t feel like looking for something else, so he left it there. When the second episode came to a close, and the credits started to roll, George yawned, stretching out his legs. He looked at the clock on the cable box: 4:00 a.m. Ben noticed him checking the time.

“My brother should be here any minute now,” he said.

“Where did you say he was coming from again?”

“Mulberry Park. You now, up by Canton?”

“Yeah, I know where it is.”
Another show was starting on TV, some show George didn’t recognize.

“Hey, George, can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, what is it?”

“Nah, never mind.”

George looked at the man sitting at the other end of the couch.

“Go ahead, shoot,” George said.

“Well, the thing is…it’s kind of personal.”

“All right, now I’m worried,” George said, only half in jest. “Come on, ask me.”

“What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

George didn’t know how to respond. He laughed a little.

“The worst thing?” he finally said. “That is personal. Where did that come from?”

“I don’t know; I was just curious. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.”

“Well, um…I don’t know. I haven’t really done anything that bad.”

“Oh, come on. Everyone has done some bad things.”

“What about you, then?” George asked.

“What about me?”

“What’s the worst thing that you’ve ever done?”

“No, no; I asked first.”

George thought about it for a moment.

“Well, I stole twenty dollars out of my mom’s purse when I was fifteen,” he said. “I don’t know, I guess that’s the worst thing.”

Ben shook his head dismissively.

“That can’t be the worst thing,” he said.
“Stealing from my own mother? I’d say that’s pretty bad. She ended up blaming my brother, and I let him take the fall.”

Ben looked him over for a moment, and then shook his head again.

“No; there’s something else. I can see it in you.”

George was starting to feel uncomfortable with the line of questioning. He looked at the clock again. It was 4:09.

“Maybe you should call your brother and see if he’s almost here.”

“No, he doesn’t have a cell. He’s practically a Luddite. No computer, either. Nice dodge, though.”

“Dodge? I’m not dodging anything; I answered you already. I’m sorry you don’t think that stealing from my mother is a worthy enough answer.”

“You didn’t answer; not really. I can see.”

“What do you see?” George asked with a note of irritation in his voice.

“I see what you don’t want me to see.”

There was an uncomfortable moment of silence between the two men. A pair of headlights lit up the front window; George stood up and walked over to the window, moving the curtain aside and peering out into the night. The street was empty; it had just been a passing car. He let the curtain fall back into place and turned back to the living room. Ben was still seated on the couch, looking at the TV. George walked back to the couch and sat down as far away as he could from the other man.

“I knew it would be a mistake to ask you,” Ben said.

“Yeah, well…your brother’s sure taking his sweet time.”

“He’ll be here soon.”
“What about you?” George asked.

“Huh?”

“I told you the worst thing I’ve done; now tell me your worst thing.”

“I’ll tell you mine once you tell me yours.”

“I already--”

“No, you didn’t; not really.”

“Damn it!”

George got up off the couch and walked to the window again, looking out and seeing the empty street outside, still and silent. Streetlamps cast eerie pools of light all along the dark street.

He cast a glance back at Ben--still on the couch--before going into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and grabbed out a can of beer. He popped it open and took a chug.

“It must be bad,” Ben’s voice came from behind him.

George turned around and saw the man standing in the kitchen doorway, the hint of a sneer on his face.

“Jesus Christ. What is your deal, man?” George asked, exasperated.

“No deal. I’m just curious.”

“Yeah, maybe it’s time you took your curiosity outside to wait for your fuckin’ brother. How about that, friend?”

“There’s no need for foul language,” Ben said. “I just asked you a question, that’s all.”

“Cool. Now leave.”

Ben said nothing for a moment, and the two men stood staring at each other, George still with the beer in his hand.

“All right,” Ben finally said. “No problem. Thank you for your hospitality.”
Ben headed for the front door and George followed him, taking another sip of beer. Ben opened the door and stepped out. George put his hand on the door and started to close it, but the door suddenly rocked back into him hard enough to send him to the floor. The beer can went rolling across the floor, emptying its amber liquid contents onto an otherwise clean white carpet. Ben stepped back into the house and closed the door behind him.

“What the hell?” George mumbled in shock.

And then the other man was standing over him, and with one blow to the head George felt the world slip away as he lost consciousness.

In the darkness George head noises, a voice, something else he couldn’t quite identify. At one point he felt like he was flying, but when he tried to open his eyes he saw a reflection of himself, as if he were staring into a mirror, and then that one reflection turned into a hundred reflections, and he closed his eyes, knowing that he was not awake, that he was still gone from the waking world, the real world he had once thought he knew so well, a world where a stranger didn’t knock on your door at three in the morning and fuck everything up. He wanted to get back to that world. All at once he felt like he was floating in water, but this time when he opened his eyes he could see nothing at all, and he decided that he must be floating in a sea of ink.

Back in the waking world, that world that George wanted to get back to, Ben dumped a glass of cold water on George’s head. George gasped, staring around with big saucer eyes. His gaze settled on Ben. The look on George’s face transformed from one of stunned befuddlement into one of righteous anger. George realized that he was sitting down, and he tried to stand, but he found himself unable to. He looked down and found that he was tied to the chair. His shirt had been removed, leaving him bare-chested.
“It took me a little while,” Ben said, “but I was able to find some rope in your garage. I hope you don’t mind that I appropriated it.”

“Let me out of this, you son of a bitch!”

“I already warned you about the harsh language.”

“Fuck you!” George yelled, spit flying from his mouth.

“Quiet down,” Ben replied calmly.

Ben brought up another chair and placed it so that it was facing George, and he sat in it. He reached down and set the empty water glass on the floor. They were in the living room. The TV had been turned off while George was away in dreamland, and the house was quiet. Ben cleared his throat.

“So, now you are going to answer my question truthfully,” he said. “What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

For a second George just stared at him, and then he broke into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

“You’re a fuckin’ fruitcake,” George managed through the laughter.

“That’s not very nice, George.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Ben lashed out, striking George on the side of his face. The laughter stopped, replaced by a cold stare from the bound man, aimed at his captor.

“There,” Ben said, satisfied with the result. “Now, it’s time to answer my question. Just answer it, and I will leave you alone.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m a man of my word, George.”
“The brokedown car? The dead cellphone?”

Ben winced.

“Fair enough. A bit of necessary subterfuge, and I’m not proud of it. But I speak the truth now. Answer my question truthfully and I will leaver. You’ll never see me again.”

George thought about this for a second.

“Why does it matter to you?” he asked.

“That’s not important. What is important is that it does matter to me.”

George whispered something under his breath.

“What was that?” Ben asked.

“Nothing.”

Ben lunged forward and struck George again. George let out a grunt of pain.

“There will be no more lies between us,” Ben said. “I won’t have it. What did you say?”

“I said, ‘fucking asshole’. Are you happy?”

“Of course not. None of this makes me happy. Is that what you think this is, some kind of sick game for my own pleasure?”

“I have no idea what this is.”

“Well, it’s not that; that much is certain.”

George tried to pull against the ropes, but there was no give; he was tied up pretty good.

“George, I’m going to ask you again. I want you to think carefully, and to answer honestly. If you don’t do this, I am going to hurt you. Do you understand?”

“What do you--”

“Uh-uh. One word--yes or no. Do you understand?”

George nodded his head. Ben sighed.
“I’ll accept that. Now here we go. What is the worst thing that you have ever done?”

George thought about it for a while. A full minute went by before he opened his mouth to reply.

“I slept with one of my wife’s friends. It was before we were married.”

“Before you were engaged?” Ben asked.

“After.”

“So she was your fiancé at the time.”

“Yes.”

“And when you say slept, you really mean…”

“You know what I mean.”

Ben stomped down on one of George’s feet. George was barefoot, and Ben had on boots. The pain was terrific; George screamed.

“What do you mean when you say that you ‘slept’ with her?”

“I fucked her! All right? Is that what you want to hear? I fucked her.”

“Better.”

Ben stood up and walked around his prisoner. George squirmed in his seat as he tried to turn his head enough to see what the man was up to. Ben came back around, and George saw that he was carrying something in one hand. It was a pair of pliers.

“I found this in your garage, too,” Ben said.

“What is that for?”

“I’m going to use it to hurt you, as I said that I would.”

“But I answered your question honestly,” George said, a new shade of fear entering into his voice.
“Nope. That’s not the worst thing. Not the worst thing by far.”

Ben raised the wrench up and George tried to push himself back, away from the instrument. Ben grabbed one shoulder and rooted him firmly to the ground. Then he raised the pliers up and used them to grab a bit of flesh on George’s stomach. He squeezed hard, and again George screamed, a sharper cry than before. Ben loosened his grip, and the pliers released the raw flesh.

Ben dropped the pliers on the floor and shoved George sideways; he landed on the floor, still stuck to the chair. The beer can that he had dropped earlier was laying not more than a foot from his face. He could smell the beer in the carpet. A fleeting thought flashed across his mind: “It’s gonna be a bitch getting that odor out of the carpet.” And then a booted foot pressed down on his face. George grunted and tried to speak, but all that came out were incoherent, muffled mumbles. The boot lifted away, and Ben pulled George back upright.

“Tell me,” Ben said.

“I told you already, you demented motherfucker!”

Ben reached down and picked up the pliers.

“No, no, don’t--”

Before George could say anything more Ben gripped his bottom lip with the pliers and started twisting and pulling at the same time. This elicited another scream from George. The pain was tremendous; it felt too big for one man to experience and live to tell about it. Blood poured into his mouth, slick and coppery. And then his lip was released.

“See what you’re making me do to you?” Ben asked. “It didn’t have to be like this. You chose this.”

“I’m gonna fucking kill you, you fuck!” George yelled, blood and spit running down his chest.
“Hmm. That’s funny.”

Ben took a seat; the pliers were still in his hand.

“Let’s try this again,” he said.

“Go to hell.”

“I probably will. What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?”

“I let you into my home. That’s the worst thing.”

“I know that was merely a jest, so I won’t count it as a wrong answer. That’s your one freebie. Try again.”

“I don’t know! Okay? I don’t know what it is that you think I did, or what you want me to say. Just tell me, and I’ll say it.”

“Only you can save yourself, George. The truth can set you free, but it has to be your truth.”

“I stole money from a cash register at the store I worked at when I was seventeen. I threw a rock through a church window when I was, like, thirteen. I sucker punched a guy at a bar once. Is that good enough?”

Ben looked at him for a moment.

“No,” he replied.

He stood up and leaned over George. He grabbing hold of George’s pants and started to pull them down.

“What the hell are you doing? Stop!”

“You still haven’t told me the truth, George. I’m going to have to get a little extreme.”

“No, stop. I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you.”

Ben kept pulling on the pants.

“I hit someone with my car!”
Ben stopped. He slowly moved back to his own chair and sat down. Neither of them said anything. George found the silence unbearable, so he filled it with his voice.

“I hit a woman with my car two years ago. I was tired. I had worked late that night, and I was so tired, and I thought about pulling over to the side of the road to take a little nap, but I wanted to get home, so I kept driving. My eyes must have closed for a second, just a second. I felt a jolt, and I thought I had hit a deer. I stopped and looked in the rearview, but I couldn’t see anything on the road behind me. I got out of the car and looked around. I found her by the side of the road. There was blood coming out of her mouth. She was still alive. When she looked at me…it was horrible. There was so much pain and fear in her eyes. She tried to speak, but starting coughing instead. She was coughing up blood.”

“What happened next?”

“I told her that she was gonna be all right. I lied to her. She reached out and grabbed my hand, and she held it like that until she…”

“Until she…what?”

“Until she died.”

“And I suppose that was when you called nine-one-one, right?”

George didn’t answer him.

“George?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I…I had stopped at a bar after I left work. I had a couple drinks. I wasn’t drunk, but…”

“Go on,” Ben prompted him.
“I didn’t think I was drunk, but I didn’t want to take a chance. I was afraid that if they made me blow into one of those machines…that it would show that I was drunk.”

“So what did you do?”

“I dragged her away from the road, into some tall grass, so she couldn’t be seen from the road.”

“Mm-hmm. Then?”

“I got back in my car.”

Ben nodded for him to continue.

“I drove away.”

This last bit came out in a whisper.

“Did you ever tell anyone?” Ben asked. “Your wife? A priest?”

“No, I never told anyone.”

George sat quietly, his chest slick from the blood still dripping from his lip, as well as the first wound on his stomach. A few tears traced their way down his cheeks. Ben stood up. He dropped the pliers to the carpet.

“And now I know,” he said.

Ben turned and headed toward the door.

“Who are you?” George asked; his voice sounded weak.

Ben turned back.

“You don’t know?”

“No,” George said.

“Well, then…you never will.”
Ben opened the door and stepped out, then shut the door softly. George stared at the door for some time, half expecting it to open again, for Ben to come back and pick up the pliers, to finish what he had started. But Ben did not come back; he kept his word.

The tears came pouring forth then. George cried until he forgot why he was crying. He cried until there were no more tears left. At some point he fell asleep in the chair; if he dreamt while asleep, he did not remember upon waking. The sun came up, and traffic passed back and forth outside as people went about their day. At nine-thirty in the morning George heard a car pull into the driveway. Shortly after that he heard voices on the other side of the door. A key was slipped into the lock and turned, although the door was already unlocked. The door swung open and George caught his wife’s eye as soon as she entered. She stood there like a statue, a look of unbelief tattooed on her face. It was Ryan, the older boy, who broke the silence.

“Holy crap! Dad, what happened to you?”

“Ryan, take your brother outside,” George said; his lips were caked with dried blood.

“But--”

“Just do it!” George commanded.

Ryan obeyed, and hustled his little brother out just as the younger boy’s face started to crumple in tears.

“Shut the door,” George instructed his wife.

She did what he asked before hurrying over to him. She untied the rope as quickly as she could, her fingers fumbling only slightly.

“Help me,” George said.

She helped him to his feet, and he saw that she was crying quietly.

“George, what happened?”
“It doesn’t matter now. It’s over.”

He hugged her, and she returned the embrace. Miraculously, he found that he still had some tears left, and he shuddered against her as he wept. In spite of everything, what he had done and what had been done to him, he was alive. It was a cold November morning, and he was alive.