

# The Scarf

By Joey Cruse

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *A killer storyline and prose so good it smokes. Bukowski lurks somewhere in the shadows and Selby Jr. may have put a word in but this is no knockoff: Den and Bill are their own men and they breathe and sweat with life; characterizations as sturdy as timber. Noir elements and a subtly balanced tension between real and surreal raise the heat to white hot and the clipped dialogue is sooo bullseye it's enough to make a wannabe writer weep. When genre specific fiction reaches the level of The Scarf it stands with literary fiction on the same podium and both get the gold. Quote: Alcohol didn't help depth perception and he stumbled hard and loud into the bedside table.' And: "Did you find anything, Bill?"/"Wife's box of jewelry, some silverware, the farmer's watch and some petty cash on top of the fridge. No, I didn't find anything." And, this ravishing paragraph: The scent made him nauseous and he stuck his head out the window to feel the air around the van rush over him, the wind blocking out any noise between himself and his past and the road. He looked over at Bill staring off into his own darkness and thought about Liza and figured it wasn't such a bad thing to be killed by someone who loved you—knowing how fucking terrible you are.' Five stars.*

## The Scarf

"I think Liza is trying to kill me." Denny's jaw clicked as an incisor scratched against his back molar. The whiskey was cheap and burnt. Warmth shot through thinning blood and, for good measure, he took another. "I must be losing my goddamn mind, Bill."

"Which house is it?"

"Up the road." Denny replied.

"Everyone is crazy, Den. Edna, next to my apartment, carries a 6-inch blade on her.

Damn near cut me walking past her door with groceries. She screams, 'get away from my door,

you goddamn bum,' throws the bastard open with this huge pigsticker flipped out, and says, 'oh it's just you Bill. You scared me.'

"Shit," Denny scoffed, "scared her?"

"I dropped the groceries, yelled 'GODDAMN you OLD woman. You could've killed me.' 'I'd never hurt you, Bill,' she goes. Bullshit. You can smell how much blood that blade wants." Bill tugged the crotch of his pants and wiggled his ass in the chair, "You're not crazy, Den. Everyone nowadays is armed to the teeth. My landlord opens the door with his left hand to hold a sawn-off with his right. Fucker just says, 'sorry' when he lets you in and puts the piece down. Guy thinks he's about to be murdered any time he opens the front door." Bill cocked his head and checked his speed, "I wonder what he had to do to be so afraid of opening a door."

"I don't mean old lady crazy. You can be old lady crazy if you haven't killed someone. The other day I saw my neighbor run over his dog and drive away. There's a violence in people, Bill, which, don't get me wrong, is a madness that makes a fair amount of sense."

"Liza is not trying to kill you," Bill chuckled, "women kill men all the time. Distraction, devotion, love, sex, getting stabbed with a goddamn icepick. Those aren't mutually exclusive events. You know how big a hole an icepick makes in a skull? That small," Bill said, curling his leather fingers into a quarter, "and that shit happens all of the time."

Bill drank and handed the bottle to Denny, "you need to quit drinking. We almost there?"

"Ten minutes or so."

"Fucking hell, Den, I'm out here using the fucking North Star. Where are we going?"

"Far enough, Bill. It's a good place." Denny opened the window to fresh cut grass and a sliver of moon, "not much light tonight."

Bill sighed, falling for the trap, "how is Liza trying to kill you?"

“She buys me all this shit trying to strangle me.”

Bill raised his hand, “Stop, Den. Does *she* go out and buy you those things or does *she* go out, pick out those things for *you*, and then *you* pay for them?”

“I pay for them. What’s your point, BILL?”

Bill checked the fuel gauges and stared ahead, “So you let your lady go shop, on your dime, and the amount of money she is wasting is more than you would prefer? Jesus Christ.

“Liza bought these 400 thread cotton sheets.”

“You mean you bought them.”

“Blow me. I wake up and think that Liza is putting her arms around me. I go to push her off but can’t move my arms. The sheets had me cocooned and pinned my arms against me. I tried to move, roll over, kick my feet, but the goddamn sheets wouldn’t let me move. Bill, I swear to God it was the fucking sheets.”

“Are you sure you weren’t dreaming, Den?”

“Wide awake, Bill. Wide awake. Next night, the folds were around my feet. They were moving up, Bill. They cinched my waist and the slack tightened around my chest. They were crawling for my neck, Bill. We’ve wrung them enough that they’ve learned the perfect squeeze. I thrashed and made enough noise to wake Liza and the sheets went limp.”

Bill held the bottle to the window and checked how much was left against the light, “Finish this, Den, you need it more than me.”

Denny’s hands shook.

“Christ, Den, calm down. Cool and ready. It can’t be much longer. What else is there?”

“What?”

“There must be more, Den, or your story’s shit. The whole thing is shit. You know what happens at night when you sleep? You move in bed. The sheets wrap up, around, and tighten themselves. No one can wake up out of a dream and tell if they’re awake or stuck until they catch their breath and realize reality.”

Denny pulled on the scarf around his neck, loosening it, “The blankets didn’t work, so she went out and got a scarf.”

“She probably wants you to look even more like a fag, Den,” Bill looked over and smiled, “it’s a scarf, Den.” The cashmere was thin, but insulating, with yellow and blue plaid squares against the grey that stretched the length. “Looks pretty normal to me.”

“It’s not, Bill. It moves at night.”

“Den, you get drunk and put the fucking thing in a different place,” Bill arched his spine and his bones responded, frustrated, by cracking, “scarves don’t move.”

“Really, Bill? Really? Sat it over the armrest of my chair, the next morning I found it on the edge of the seat cushion. Now, it could’ve fallen off to the left or to the right, but that would have put it on the floor or against the back of the chair. The damn thing moved forward. I threw the piece of shit on the floor the next night and woke up with it at the foot of the bed, but the thing is, Bill, it was stretched out, angled directly at me, like a fucking arrow.”

“Lose the scarf, Den,” Bill said through angry teeth.

“What?”

“Say you got drunk and put the scarf down. Liza’ll be pissed. She’ll get over it. If there’s love there, then she isn’t trying to kill you.”

“I don’t know, Bill.” Denny slapped his hands against his cheeks, “Start to slow down.”

Bill braked, turned the headlights off, and pulled onto a dirt culvert used by farmers, “You’re sure it’s empty? Bring the zips.”

“Bill, I’ve been out here every night for a week. No cars. No lights. It’s empty. They’re on vacation. We don’t need them, Bill.”

“Get your fucking head on. We take them in case.”

“Fine, Bill. Don’t use the flashlights til’ we’re in. We can see by the moon.”

“There’s barely any moon, Den.”

“It’s enough, Bill.”

With no earthly business being in a cornfield – a plantation in the Midwest designed for farming, presumably, without the slaves – the house was as tall as the trees on either side. Both levels had wrap-around porches straight out of Mayberry with a staircase that connected the two floors. Working to their advantage, shotgun doors extended the entire length of the house for easy airflow and access to all the rooms.

“Start at the top and work down. The windows are open.”

“Too loud. I’ve got the picks.”

“I told you, Bill. No one is in there.”

“Don’t get sloppy on me, Den. No chances.”

The stairs were warped but they didn’t break, and, if you weren’t a fat ass, they didn’t make much noise. Bill had the picks in and the door open in fifteen seconds. “Bad lock,” he whispered, and Denny watched Bill step forward, noiselessly, moving towards the dresser for jewelry and, if Denny did his homework, the payoff.

The safe was in the adjacent closet, but there was ten feet of wood floor to cross before rummaging, and Denny lingered, unsure of how to take the first step. The boards looked sunk

with enough knots to not be trustful. Denny let his eyes adjust and sashayed awkwardly into the bedroom. Alcohol didn't help depth perception and he stumbled hard and loud into the bedside table.

Bill hissed, "Get your shit together," his voice sizzled, "and open the fucking safe."

The farmer who owns the safe got a little too drunk and liked to talk, 'You can still hear the lock click when you hit the numbers.' Too removed to realize if you couldn't trust banks with your money then you certainly couldn't talk about how much you kept in your house to barflies.

He walked forward and felt a sharp pull. He ignored the feeling, touched the brass of the knob, and the pull tightened. He opened the door enough to grate metal on metal. The noise was soft, but his ears were bursting. He rushed, opening the door quickly, to stop the cacophony. The wife's clothes smelled like jasmine and grain, and Denny grabbed the hem of a dress and felt the sew work of self-adjustment. He took the flashlight out of his back pocket and clicked the LED on to stare at nothing but carpet covering the floors. He ran the light across the back of the closet, to the floor, but didn't see any space signifying a safe. Panicking, he put the flashlight in his mouth, went to his hands and knees, and began to massage the carpet, inch by inch, working the boards to find a spring or latch until his fingertips were numb. He stood up, and the loop in Denny's scarf cinched. His hand was on a loose end and he felt his pulse as the free length closed around his throat. 'Liza' he thought, 'not now, you dirty bitch.'

Denny needed Bill, and he whispered out of the closet, not loudly but projected, a singer in a small theater, "Bill. I can't find it."

Like a fox, Bill emerged from the next bedroom over, "what do you mean can't find it, Den? Where's the fucking safe? We have no time for this shit, Den. In and out, DEN. We can't search all fucking night."

Had they not been so big and white, Denny would've never seen the orbs in the darkness out of the corner of his eye. They fluttered, hot and white, a broken flash bulb, and the snapshot gave Denny enough to see the movement of a young girl shivering so hard and tense in the bed that she couldn't breathe. The hyperventilation created silence and the three, together in the room, jumped through their own existences – each terrified at that exact spot in time. She couldn't have been older than twenty and was in too much fear to scream. Bill seized her silence to lunge towards the bed and clamp the cup of his hand onto the girl's mouth. Her shoulders were small and tone, but her arms were still underneath the covers and, hitting her survival instincts, she struggled, flapping bird-in-a-cage arms to get free.

“Grab her arms, Den. DEN, grab her fucking arms.”

The girl had nails and was stretching her arm as close to Bill's eyes and mouth and face as possible. Denny stood still for a second before her muffled crying snapped him out of his condition. He took a step forward and climbed on top of the bed. Using his thighs to pin the girl's hips, he grabbed the forearm of her free arm and reached into the sheets to drag the other out before she could cause any damage. Taking the girl's wrists in one of his hands, Denny reached into his coat pocket and took out the zip ties. Denny could smell sandalwood lotion leaking out of her skin.

“I thought you said there'd be fucking nobody here, Den.”

“She's a fucking house sitter, Bill. How was I supposed to know? She's terrified. Just tie her up and leave her alone.”

Denny took his hand holding hers and placed enough pressure on her arms to bend her elbows to her chest which allowed him to lean forward over the girl's beautiful, wide eyes that stared back with a horrified honesty, a fear of men since man.

“I have to tie you up.”

She squirmed.

“Don’t. Don’t. I need to flip you over and place your hands behind your back. Meaning my partner needs to remove his hand. This poses a problem; it gives you a moment to scream. I don’t want to hurt you, but, if you scream, you have only a second before I will make you quiet and neither of us wants that. Blink if you understand.”

The light in her eyes twinkled in thought and she closed her eyelids only once and only for one second.

Denny felt bad. He looked over at Bill, with his hand over her mouth, and imagined how the leather must have tasted on the girl’s tongue. With his free hand, Denny unwrapped the scarf around his neck and flattened out the fabric in his hand.

“Bill, take your hand off her mouth and make sure it doesn’t close.”

Bill looked back at Denny and nodded. His palm slid to her chin while using his right hand as a lever against her forehead, forcing open her mouth, and, in this second of silence and rape, Denny jammed the folds of his scarf two fingers deep down into the girl’s throat. The men rolled the girl over onto her stomach and looped the zip-ties over the girl’s wrists. She lay there motionless, heaving her lungs through her nose, her head face down in the pillow.

“What do we do, Bill?”

“Quit saying my fucking name.”

“We’ve already said them. She was watching the whole time.”

“Then we find the safe, Den. Make sure she can’t get the gag free.”

Denny put his hand on the girl’s back, heaving up and down, and with his other shoved more plaid into the girl’s face beneath the pillow.

Bill was in the closet, pocket knife out, cutting a large, square swatch of carpet from the farmer's floor. The flashlight in Bill's mouth did its job so well the floor revealed itself to have no safe but only well-worn, wooden-planks, and Bill turned it off in jealousy – the light had accomplished its goal.

“You told me it was a sure thing, Denny. A sure fucking thing, and here we are standing with our dicks in our hand.” Bill calmly looked at Denny, “Ask the girl where the safe is.”

“What if she doesn't know?”

“Is that what I said, Den? *Make* her tell you something. I'm grabbing the wife's jewels and we're getting the fuck out of here, you damned fool.”

Denny could see the form of the young girl through the sheets. The fabric was thin cotton and made a statue out of the backs of her thighs, her tied hands - triceps to shoulders. She was the lost, cotton sculpture of Pompeii, and Denny saw a loveliness in her distress, the minutiae of terror seared into the brain - and, as far as he would dare, he wanted her like that forever.

“There isn't a safe. I'm going re-tie your hands in front of you so that you can move, enough to escape, after we leave.”

He grabbed the girl's wrists, flipped to the blade his multi-tool, and popped the zip-tie with a single, swift motion. Her arms went slack, to her sides, and Denny rolled her body over onto its side as a lifeguard does to let the victim vomit. Denny had anticipated a reaction – the reeling from his touch, the quiver of her breath, or the Stockholm-syndromed acceptance of his caress. He pressed two fingers to the artery in her throat, he could feel the small peach hairs of her still warm chin, but no pulse. He moved his hand up to her cheek and lifted the girl's head, angled it, so that he could look into her eyes. A void, she was dead and gone.

“She dead, Bill. The girl's dead.”

“What do you mean she’s dead, Den?”

“She choked on the fucking scarf and suffocated in the pillow, Bill. She’s fucking dead.”

“Grab the scarf and the zip, Den.”

“What about the girl, Bill?”

“We’ve got to leave.”

“What about the girl, BILL?”

“We’ve got to leave, Den.”

Denny pulled his scarf out of the young girl’s mouth. The moisture from her breath was still alive and held within the strings of fabric and Denny could feel the deep wetness on his palm as he carried the scarf back to the van and threw the cloth next to his feet. Bill started up the engine and backed out of the culvert with the headlights off.

“Did you find anything, Bill?”

“Wife’s box of jewelry, some silverware, the farmer’s watch, and some petty cash on top of the fridge. No. I didn’t find anything.”

The air in the van was thick, earned in the destruction of innocence. There was a breeze and Denny thought he could smell sandalwood in the night. The scent made him nauseous and he stuck his head out the window to feel the air around the van rush over him, the wind blocking out any noise between himself and his past and the road. He looked over at Bill staring off into his own darkness and thought about Liza and figured it wasn’t such a bad thing to be killed by someone who loved you - knowing how fucking terrible you are. Denny checked his eyes in the side mirror seeing wetness and wind evaporating the tears before they reached his nerves. He brought his head and hand inside far enough to scratch an itch that had been spreading from his

foot slowly and steadily towards his calf. He reached down only to grab a handful of cold, wet cashmere that had snared itself into a knot around his ankle.

**Author's Note:**

*Inspiration: I can't say that anything good inspired this story. If we're being honest, and we are, you could probably hang this one on some of the usual suspects: jealousy, insecurity, the need to craft wild metaphors in language to avoid simply telling someone what is on your mind – all are decent candidates.*

*Intention: I wanted to practice style. This story began as a challenge to write a piece that was entirely written in dialogue – both a fun and futile method of practicing subtext – and I had never written a story in which a character dies before (something I felt, and still feel, is incredibly difficult to avoid falling into some author/sadist, reader/voyeur trope) and you can't just kill people willy-nilly. Hence the poor attempt at magical realism with the scarf, I needed something inanimate and vicious because I couldn't physically write out the main characters becoming violent.*

*Literary influences: I've recently been reading Blaise Cendrars, translations of early, still-writing-in-Russian Nabokov, and John Fante. Richard Brautigan, Phillip Ó Ceallaigh, John Kennedy Toole, Etgar Keret, Aleksander Hemon, Celine, Ken Kesey, Carson McCullers, Burroughs...the list won't stop really.*

**BIO:** *Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and an even worse English student – he is, easily more, a lot of nothing and everything. When not getting into trouble, he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and finishes a Masters in Composition and Rhetoric in Lafayette, LA. His other short story work has also been featured in Phree Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while small spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press.*