

Threads of the Story

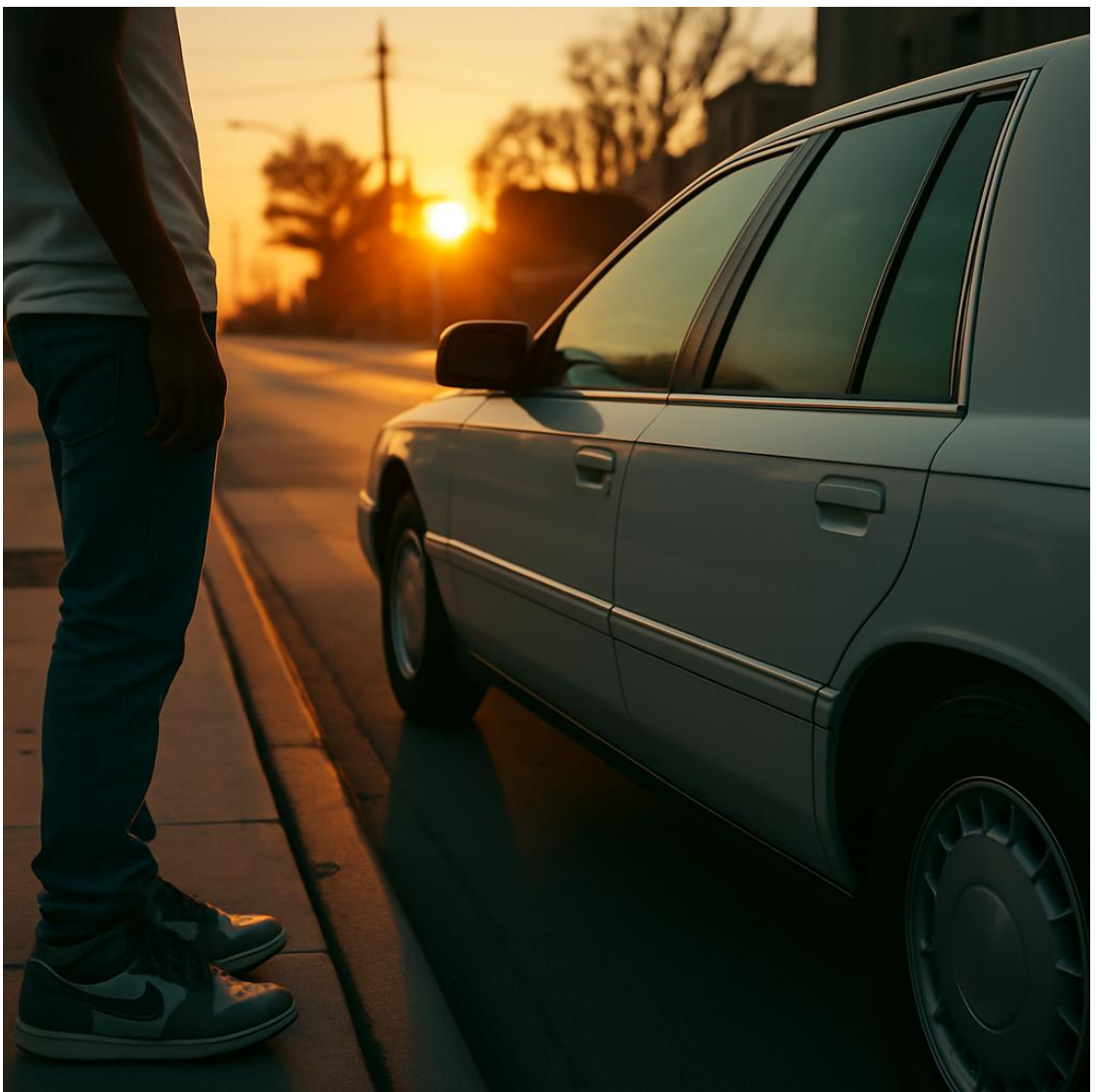
A scene from Ronaldo Gilley's **Savage Land...**

You were warned by your parents. Don't talk to strangers.

Because this is how it starts.

One stranger.

One mistake.



Darius took the long way home from school. Sagging his jeans, he had to keep pulling his pants up every few steps. He missed the school bus for the second time this week. On purpose. The older kids would rank on him the entire ride home, mostly deriding him about his clothes which were all hand-me-downs. His father was killed in a robbery five years ago.

Now on public assistance, he and his mother had to swallow their pride often and accept clothes from neighbors when their kids grew too big to wear them anymore. Kids in the neighborhood took a lot of pride in wearing brand name clothes and expensive shoes. Darius had a lot of name brands too, but the jeans and shirts were often faded, and shoes scuffed up a bit by the time he got to wear them.

Darius was able to escape ridicule and regain a level of peace as he walked down the road by his lonesome. He stumbled to prevent himself from tripping. He looked down at his scuffed-up Jordans and dropped to one knee to replace his sneakers. He looked up and saw a white Cadillac with tinted windows pull up to the curb. Darius gasped as the window rolled down slowly. He braced himself, readying for a run.

Then, a voice from inside the car called out, "Hey lil man,"

With his hands still on his shoelaces, Darius didn't respond. He stood and peered into the car. The driver was dark-skinned with wavy salt and peppered hair.

"Hey lil man," the driver yelled again. "Come holla at me."

Darius approached the car slowly. "Yes, sir?"

"You want a ride?" the driver asked. "I can—"

"No sir," Darius replied. "I can walk. I-I'm okay."

The driver flashed Darius a friendly smile and unlocked the passenger door. "Come on, get in," he motioned. "You ain't gotta walk home."

Darius sighed and, against his better judgement, got into the car, gently closing the door.