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Strangers

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I slam the receiver back into its cradle. The payphone mocks me, while freezing rain slops all over my black umbrella. To keep my gloveless hands in their pockets, I have anchored the plastic handle in my shirt’s breast pocket. The lapels of my heavy black overcoat stubbornly refuse to stay tucked under my chin anyway. I feel like the damn Morton’s salt girl, standing here alone like an idiot.

I pull my right hand out long enough to glance at my pocket watch, an action I have repeated regularly for an hour and twenty minutes now. In between these time-checks, I have been battling the graffiti-covered payphone before me. A single quarter has entered and exited this phone more times than I care to remember, all because the phones at the taxi company are busy.

With nothing but mindless manual dexterity to occupy me, my thoughts have naturally revolved around Jenny. I miss her. During the play tonight I especially felt her absence embodied in the empty seat beside me. I was so preoccupied by it that I barely paid any attention to the performance, and will therefore have to give it a good review.

After almost a year and a half together, this Monday she suddenly decided that she was unhappy with herself, which meant, of course, that she was unhappy with me. That was that. I have not spoken to her for three days now, and probably never will again. So, tonight, attending a play alone for the first time in several years, I dressed up slightly more than usual, in the vain hope that I might meet someone new, someone who can help me to forget her.

I sincerely regret my choice of clothing now. What I wouldn’t give to be wearing boots instead of soaked leather dress shoes, encrusted with a visible salt line. And why didn’t I think to roll my damn shirt-sleeves back down before the end of the show? It had been so stifling in there that I had allowed myself the impropriety of cuff-rolling, and the theater had been dark enough that no one noticed. But when the lights had come back on at the end, I had quickly thrown my sports coat on without thinking of the weather conditions.

The phone lines must be down. I mean, really, how could a taxi company be this busy after midnight on a Thursday? In retrospect, I should have stayed in the lobby, but then I didn’t exactly expect to still be trying to get a cab when the theater closed and locked its doors. Now the place is dark and the narrow street is deserted, except for the occasional car that blows past me, trying to splatter my expensive clothes with slush and road salt. Three
taxis have been among these, at which I waved insanely, trying to attract their attention. They saw me all right, but the bastards just kept right on going. The last cabby, while flying past, had actually looked me right in the face, pointed at me, and laughed. That was when I realized that my situation had officially become a serious problem.

Rapid footsteps approach from behind; I whirl around, pulling my hands out. A tall black man, clad in faded jeans, a wool jacket, and a soiled baseball cap, motions with an open palm for me to relax. He smiles, revealing only a few, yellowed teeth that are radically out of alignment. The mouth says to me: "Excuse me, Mister, but I'm out of gas, and I gotta get home."

I don't want any trouble. Usually when I get approached like this, I'm moving. But now I'm cornered. Trapped. I mentally count the bills in my wallet, wondering how long they will stay there. It's too late for me to play dead, but I can sure act helpless. "Look, pal. I'd like to help, but I kind of have my own problems. I'm stranded myself. And I don't have any gas on me at the moment."

This guy is not going to just walk away. In fact, he looks even more eager now than before. "Hey, man, we can help each other. You help me get some gas, I'll take you where you gotta go."

I eye the man suspiciously from beneath the rim of my umbrella. If he had wanted to mug me, I would already be unconscious on the sidewalk. So what is this guy's scam?

"You have a name?" I ask. That's right. Start asking for details and they run for cover every time.

"Name's Herb Landon. I live in Wellsford. You know where that is?" I shake my head, releasing a shower of droplets from the umbrella. Either this guy is really on the level, or he is damn good. He didn't even bat an eyelash. "It's just down the highway a stretch. Grew up there. Played football for Carlton High. Got my B.A. at the Community College. I'm a chef."

"Really?" I say with feigned interest. Well, that was more information than I needed. The guy should just hand out resumés. I wonder if any of that had been true. Maybe the name. What gets me is that he obviously wants money, but he won't come out and say it. Is he too proud, or is he trying to play on my emotions? I decide to lay things out on the table for once. "Look, if you need money, how come you haven't asked me for it?"

Herb looks genuinely surprised, and partially offended. "Everybody needs money," he says. "I need help."

The genuine emotion in his voice startles me. "But the only way I can help you is by giving you money."

"You wouldn't be giving it to me," Herb assures me. "You'd be paying me for a service rendered. I'm offering to drive you."

When did this turn into a business proposal? I wonder who I can tell this bizarre story to, assuming that I ever manage to get home. Last week I would have told Jenny, but now it would have to be one of the guys at the paper. Jenny. For the first time in three solid days, I had actually forgotten
about our break-up. She had said many painful things, the worst one being that I am boring to be around because I don’t take risks and never try anything new. Maybe it’s time for a little self-improvement, then. I don’t especially want to hear that complaint ever again.

I throw a quick glance back to my longstanding rival, the phone booth. I could stand here waiting for a cab all night, and the police would find my body tomorrow with a quarter frozen to my palm. Or, I could go with Herb right now and possibly live through the night. Three nights ago I would never have considered trusting a complete stranger, but now, well, what do I really have to lose? I mean, I don’t know any cab drivers, but I still trust them to drive me places.

“All right, Herb, you’ve sold me. Lead the way.” Herb crosses the street and I follow. Then it hits me. “Wait a minute. If you’re out of gas, how can you drive to a gas station?”

“I can’t. You’re gonna push.”

I knew it. I knew it was a scam. “What?! I pay, you push.”

“Sorry, man. No one drives the vehicle but me.”

“Well, I can’t exactly drive a car with no fuel, now can I? I’ll just be steering.”

“Same difference to me. Give it up. It’s not gonna happen, my friend.”

Ha! He thinks I’m his friend. “Look, there is no way I am going to pay you so that I can push . . .”

“Here we are,” Herb interrupts.

We stand before a huge, beat-up, blue Ford sedan, manufactured over a decade ago. The body has severe rust damage up to the windows, and a large crack snakes across the windshield. There are no hubcaps and the trunk doesn’t latch properly because the rear end was crumpled in a collision. To prevent it from flying open, Herb has tied the trunk latch to the bumper with some twine. The interior is littered with empty cigarette packs and glass bottles.

“This is your . . . car?” I ask.

“Yeah, beauty ain’t it? I’ve had her eight years and she’s never done me wrong.”

“Until tonight, of course.”

“Oh, no. It was my fault for not filling up this morning. You ready to roll?”

“Herb, I can’t push this monster! It must weigh five thousand pounds. There’s enough steel here for three cars.”

“Trust me, it’s much lighter than it looks.” Herb unlocks the door and climbs into the driver’s seat. I can’t believe he actually keeps the doors locked. Who’s going to steal this beast? Herb shifts the car into neutral. Apparently our argument is over, and I am clearly the loser.

Reluctantly, I bend my knees and grasp the frame exposed by the open door. It’s been a long time since I’ve assumed this position. When I was a teenager, I owned a Volkswagen beetle that I had to push-start half the time.
Of course, that car could have fit in the back seat of this one with enough room for me to sit comfortably beside it. I lean a shoulder into the metal and push as hard as I can.

After several minutes of slipping around in the slush, the big American boat of a car begins to crawl forward. Herb informs me that the nearest gas station is only two blocks away, which he located shortly before finding me. Unfortunately, because of a slight incline, we have to take a longer, indirect route. I am too busy swearing to respond. Herb doesn’t seem to mind, though.

Forty minutes later, we roll slowly into the pool of yellow, incandescent light flooding the concrete oasis of the gas station. A sleepy clerk watches us disinterestedly from behind bullet-proof glass, inside the metal cocoon attached to the closed mini-mart. Herb stops the car next to the closest pump, and I fall to my knees, panting. Stepping past me, he picks up the nozzle for the highest octane gasoline and moves toward the tank.

"Whoa!" I blurt out, shaking my head. "Cheap stuff!"

"Not in this car, my friend," Herb responds amiably. "If I put anything besides premium gas in this bad boy, the engine’ll start knocking and ping like crazy."

"Beggars can’t be choosers," I say, struggling to my feet, much to the chagrin of my wobbly knees.

"That is a very selfish attitude, Mister . . . say, what is your name, anyway?"

"What do you care? I already pushed your car for you."

"O.K. fine, be anti-social. But may I please use premium gas so that I don’t destroy my car?"

It looks pretty destroyed already to me, but he did that thing with his voice again and I soften right up. I can’t believe I’m this easily manipulated. I had thought it was only Jenny I couldn’t say no to, but I guess I’m a sucker for just about anybody. If she were here right now she would call me cheap, and she would be right. I’m ready for risk-taking, but I’m not willing to give up being cheap yet. "All right, Herb. But only half a tank."

Herb nods and sticks the nozzle directly into the side of the car, as the gas cap appears to be missing. I watch him filling the tank, then mumble, "By the way, the name’s Danvers."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Danvers."

"You know, Herb, you really ought to keep a gas can in your trunk. Even if it was empty, you could have walked here, filled it, and walked back in half the time it took us to push the whole car here."

"True," Herb thinks aloud. "But then I wouldn’t have met you, would I?"

"There might not have been anyone there to help you."

"But you were," Herb says. "You see, destiny brings people together at times when it seems least intentional."

"Oh, come on," I reply. "You don’t actually believe in fate, do you?"

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Herb replaces the nozzle on the pump. "I think I just answered that, Mr. Danvers."

"Call me Paul," I say abruptly, surprising myself. I don't even let the guys at work call me by my first name. Why did I say that?

"O.K., Paul. Time to pay the piper." We walk toward the hermetically sealed attendant. A silver metal drawer shoots out at us as we approach.

The clerk's distorted voice comes through the window speaker: "Eighteen-fifty."

I turn to Herb. "Just how big is this gas tank?" Herb only smiles. I drop a twenty dollar bill in the drawer, thinking how many more gallons of the cheap stuff we could have had for that amount. Oh, well, not my car, although it is my money, and cab fare would have been a lot less. But somehow I don't particularly mind splurging tonight. These past few days have been rough, and I sort of enjoy Herb's company. The drawer suddenly snaps closed, shaking me out of my reverie and almost taking my hand off. It reappears a moment later containing a dollar bill and two quarters. I retrieve these and turn to Herb as the drawer retracts loudly within its protective shell. We walk slowly back toward the car.

"Any tolls on your way home?" I ask.

"No."

"Oh." I replace the money in my wallet and return the wallet to my right front pocket. Thieves are less likely to get at it there than in a back pocket. I discovered that lesson the hard way. As I walk around to the passenger side door, Herb says, "Not getting in that way. That door hasn't worked for years."

I walk back around to the driver's side and slide in past the steering wheel. Easing myself over the automatic shift, I flop into the passenger seat. Springs poke through the vinyl cover and into my legs. The whole car reeks of cigarette smoke. I guess pushing hadn't been so bad after all. Herb is able to start the car on the second try, and, even though I am practically frozen, I roll down the window a little. Herb notices that I keep my mouth glued to the crack of rushing air, but says nothing. I tell him to head north, and we ride for awhile in silence.

"Do you believe in God?" Herb asks suddenly.

"No," I respond, giving him a sidelong glance. "Why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

I turn to face him, leaving the fresh, frigid air behind. His eyes remain fixed on the road. "You do."

"Yes, I do." Herb glances over at me. "What made you so sure?"

"Why else would you have asked?"

Herb sits silently until I turn back to the window, then asks, "Which way?"

"Keep straight on this for a few more blocks. I'll let you know when to turn." I hesitate, then add, "So, why do you?"

For a moment I think he has not heard me, but I soon realize that he is
deep in thought. I don’t think anyone ever asked him that before. Finally, Herb answers by asking “Why believe in anything?”. I laugh, and Herb frowns instantly. “Are you trying to insult me?”

“No. Not at all,” I say, smiling. “That just happens to be exactly the same answer I give when people ask me why I don’t.”

“Oh. I see.” Herb ponders this, then chuckles to himself. “That is funny.”

“Turn here,” I say.

Herb pulls the car over to the curb in front of my three-story apartment building. After he gets out, I slide back over the gear shift and stand up next to him, brushing the debris off my suit pants. I look up at my building, then over to Herb. What do I say now? I will never see this man again, and, unexpectedly, I am disappointed. I look into his eyes and say, “Thank you very much, Herb.” I mean it.

“Thank you, Paul.”

We shake hands.