

A Vehicular Situation

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“I know him,” Gary said. He slowed down on the county road, and looked over into the field off to their right. “I think he’s stuck.” It was late afternoon, still a couple of hours before dark.

He and LeeAnn were on their way to a fortieth birthday party for a friend out in Brown County on a clear, warm evening in September. The leaves had not yet begun to change. If they had, the roads would have been far busier, full of leaf-lookers who had come to see the colors in southern Indiana.

“You know him?” LeeAnn turned to look.

“I definitely know him. What’s he doing out there?”

“We’ll be late for the party,” she said. Her way of saying that she knew they were going to turn around. “He’s probably already called Triple-A.”

“Yeah, but I know him.”

“All right—you’ve got the snappy, midnight-blue pickup with four-wheel drive and a toolbox, plus you know the guy—it’s kismet,” LeeAnn said. Her voice had a quality he loved, especially when she teased him. It was textured, scratchy on the outside and soft underneath.

He pulled sharply into the next gravel driveway to turn around. “Crap—the cake,” he said, as he heard the slide of the box on the back seat. LeeAnn reached back with a steadying hand to catch the cake box. There was no way he could twist and reach the way that she just did. With his back, one quick move like that could mean a day and a half of debilitating pain, with his giant blue ice pack as his companion in bed instead of LeeAnn.

“You could slow down a little,” she said.

“Look at him, though,” Gary said. The man stood out in the tall grass, looking epic in his isolation. One hand protected his eyes from the sun, and he waved slowly with the other. An old wave. The man’s car—a noble, cream-colored Cadillac—was moored behind him. “That’s the guy who told me to take Tylenol,” Gary said. “That’s him.”

“Ahhhh.” LeeAnn nodded. “Nasty, nasty man.”

“No, I’m serious. After I fell, he was the first doctor I saw. Remember? And when I came home I was so mad that I pulled the screen door off?” The door had twisted as it broke free, the sharp edge catching Gary above the right eye. He’d walked into the house bleeding, yelling, “I’m okay!” before LeeAnn

even saw him. He didn’t want to scare her. But she wasn’t scared. LeeAnn was a calm person; he was the one who wasn’t. Even now, he could feel a sense of tension in his chest as he pulled off the road into the field, but LeeAnn just looked relaxed, along for the ride.

“I thought the door just fell off by itself,” she said, and though she kept her tone even and innocent, they’d been married for fifteen years, and Gary wasn’t fooled. He could detect her sarcasm through a sign as small as the nature of the breath she took before she spoke.

“It’s not like I ripped it down with my teeth,” he said. “I was mad and pulled too hard, and, you know, it was broken to begin with.” He brushed his hair off his forehead—the feel of it always annoyed him when he began to get warm or agitated. He looked up to see the sunlit trees glowing on the edge of the field. As he drove, he tried to stick to more open areas, but in a few places he couldn’t avoid the taller grass which shushed and scratched against the bottom of the truck as it bumped over the uneven ground. With each bounce, Gary tried to adjust his body so that he would be ready for the next one, but there was no predicting. “He doesn’t look so hot,” Gary said, nodding toward the doctor, twenty yards away. The old man had stopped waving and now stood with both hands shielding his eyes. He leaned somewhat to the right, as if something were trying to push him over from the inside. “Kaspar, that’s his name. Dr. Kaspar. Why in the world would he be out here?” Gary winced and pushed his lower back into the seat in an effort to stretch it. “I was so incredibly mad at him. Do you remember that? Just so...” Gary let out a flat snarl of annoyance.

LeeAnn threw him an exaggerated look of fear with wide, crossed eyes.

“No, I’m serious. I was really angry. The guy just blew me off. He thought I was fine and my back would stop hurting if I weighed two hundred and three pounds instead of two hundred and thirteen. And all men over six feet tall have back pain or something insane like that.” Gary slowed down as they got nearer. “I could hardly walk, remember? I had to pull myself through doorways—you know, like I had to really grab onto something to support my weight.” Gary liked to talk about his back pain in this way, as something he was struggling against, rather than something he had succumbed to.

“Well, here’s the good Dr. Kaspar stuck out in a field in the middle of nowhere,” LeeAnn said. “You could take him out and nobody would ever know.”

Gary leaned forward and gripped the steering wheel. He sped up for a second, yelling, “I’m taking him out!” then glanced up in time to see Dr. Kaspar look frightened, as though he thought Gary might really mow him down. Gary abruptly slowed and then stopped a few yards from the doctor.

“Idiot,” LeeAnn said to Gary. “How could you have been mad at this man? He’s a hundred years old.”

“He’s not more than seventy,” Gary said. “But it looks like he hasn’t had a good year.”

Dr. Kaspar squinted at Gary and LeeAnn through glasses so big they looked like goggles, Gary thought. Kaspar’s hands were tentative. He lifted them slightly, about to gesture, then dropped them and let them hang loosely at his sides. Gary had seen this look on old men before—it was the look his father had in the years before his death—and it got to him. He couldn’t stand to see a man looking weak or confused. He’d rather have the guy yelling at him, telling him to take Tylenol, telling him to stop moaning about a little back pain.

Gary sprang out of the truck, landed on an uneven patch, and fell. He might have been able to keep his balance if he had tried hard enough, but he had found that it was better to redirect the jolt of sudden movements towards other parts of his body if he could. In this case, his arms and chest took the brunt of it. He lay still for a moment, assessing his level of back pain, stiff grass jabbing his ear. His hands stung a little but his chest was fine. His back seemed all right, too, but he was going to give himself another second before he tried to stand. This kind of thing—falling—happened a lot, because Gary could not or would not adapt to the idea of being injured. He had never been cautious in movement, and even a year after the fall from the tree, he was flummoxed.

“Are you all right?” LeeAnn called, as she climbed out of the truck.

“I’m all right,” Gary heard the doctor reply. Even Dr. Kaspar’s voice sounded older. It had that hint of a crack in it. “But is that man all right?”

“I’m fine,” Gary yelled, hoping his voice would sound robust as it found its way up out of the grass. He pushed himself onto his knees and then stood up slowly. He was okay.

He approached the doctor. “Dr. Kaspar? How are you?” He wanted to sound gentle, but he wasn’t able to conceal the frustration he felt with this man. “You’re a little overdressed for a jaunt out into a muddy field.” Dr. Kaspar was wearing a white shirt and blue paisley tie, loafers and pressed khaki pants. He was standing in one of the more open areas, and Gary could see that his shoes had a rim of clay around the edge.

“How did you know my name?” Dr. Kaspar asked, pointing a shaky finger at Gary.

Gary glanced away for a second. “I saw you last year after I hurt my back,” he said quickly. “It’s pretty warm out here.” He looked up at the sky. “Not unbearable, but still. Have you had any water?”

“I’ve got some water in the car. I’m not *dehydrated*, if that’s what you’re worried about. God help us if we get dehydrated. We’ve all been warned about the consequences,” the doctor said. “What have you got in that fancy truck?”

“We’ve got plenty of beer,” LeeAnn said with a smile at the doctor. She looked toward the wheels of the Cadillac. “You’re pretty well stuck. You’d think with the grass being so dry, the mud would be too. It’s the clay, I guess.”

Dr. Kaspar stepped right in front of Gary, suddenly sharp. “Where did you see me?” he asked.

“At your office. I was a patient,” Gary said. He saw LeeAnn glance at him, warning him not to get worked up. Gary had never especially liked doctors. He got the idea they disapproved of him. A mild case of scoliosis, his childhood chunkiness, his tendency towards ear infections—he was a nuisance case.

“I retired. You must’ve seen my twin brother,” the doctor said, still shaking his finger at Gary.

“You have a twin brother?”

“No!” the doctor said, then blurted a single, gleeful, “Ha!”

LeeAnn laughed. Gary glared at her. “I must have seen you *before* you retired,” he said.

Dr. Kaspar cleared his throat and opened his mouth to speak. It stayed open just a little longer than what might seem normal. “Did you fall out of a tree?” he asked finally.

“Yes,” Gary said, louder than he meant to. “I mean, no. I didn’t just *fall* out. The branch I was standing on broke, and the cable slipped. I fell onto the pavement. I landed sitting up. My vertebrae were compressed. I saw a physical therapist after I saw you. I did all the exercises. He said I was one of the best patients he’d ever had. He thought I could have brought a malpractice suit against you, Dr. Kaspar.”

LeeAnn put her hand on his arm. “Gary—”

“Then I saw a chiropractor, too. Then after the chiropractor, I saw an acupuncturist. I see her every two weeks. My back is getting better.”

“You sound very energetic,” Dr. Kaspar said, as if he were speaking to a child.

“Gary, his car is stuck,” LeeAnn said. “The clay right here is a mess.” She lifted up her foot to show him a clown’s shoe of mud stuck to her sneakers. “We need to get him out. And I really wouldn’t mind going to the party.”

Dr. Kaspar just looked at them.

“Dr. Kaspar?” LeeAnn moved towards him.

“I’m going to take a leak,” he mumbled.

"We're in kind of a hurry," Gary said. "We're on our way to a birthday party."

"Here's the keys," Dr. Kaspar said. He began walking slowly towards the woods. "Pull it out as fast as you like."

LeeAnn turned to Gary. "Glad you got that off your chest?" she asked. "Are you sure you covered it all?"

"Sorry," he said.

LeeAnn nodded in the direction of the doctor. "Maybe you should go with him," she said. "The mud is really sticky, and there's all that grass."

"He'll be fine. The mud's only bad where the ground dips a little, and the grass isn't going to strangle him. Besides, we can see him," Gary said. "Anyway, he could have just gotten into the car."

"He needs to relieve himself, Gary. And he doesn't want to drive the car. Did you see the look on his face when we drove up? He was scared stiff. He's not even sure *how* to drive the car."

"How do you know?"

"Your dad. That's how I know," she said. "And every other old, confused person I've seen stuck out in the mud in the middle of a field."

Gary maneuvered the truck in front of the Cadillac and then pulled his chain out of the huge toolbox that sat behind the cab.

"Look at your shiny chain!" LeeAnn said with a little tilt of her head.

"Keep quiet about my shiny chain," he said, hooking it up to the doctor's car. "You should be impressed I've got one." LeeAnn climbed into the Cadillac and started the engine. Weird to see her in that kind of car, Gary thought, like she was suddenly sixty. "Are you going to get back in the truck?" she called.

When Gary climbed into the driver's seat and slammed the door, a handful of the thick grass caught and scratched against his shin. The grass smelled like warmth itself and every summer walk he'd ever taken with his father. He reached down and ran his hand through the seeded ends of the light brown stalks before he opened the door again and nudged the grass out with his foot.

"Ready?" he yelled, after he started the engine.

"Go ahead," LeeAnn said.

The truck lurched and immediately the wheels began to spin. Gary let up on the gas, then tried again, but the mud was worse than he'd expected. The tires caught for a second and then slipped. He tried turning the steering wheel to the right, and when that produced no effect on the truck's traction, he tried the left, hoping to get a purchase on the clay. *I seem to have a lot of energy?* He took his foot off the gas to think about that for second. The stiffness in his lower back was getting away from him, sliding into a familiar, wearying

pain. He had told Kaspar it was getting better. But the fact was that he wasn't really sure. Sometimes it got better, and sometimes it reversed, and then, mentally, he would review the whole day, looking for a point when he had done something he shouldn't have—bent over too quickly, or lifted something too heavy, or painted too long, or slept too long, or not slept enough, or slept in the wrong position. He had a friend who named levels of pain according to old girlfriends. *Obbb—that's Natalie. I just hope Janet doesn't come by. Hell, it's Brooke. I'm going to bed. I'm going to bed with Brooke.* But Gary wasn't so creative.

"We're not getting anywhere," LeeAnn yelled from the Cadillac.

Gary stuck his head out the window. "I can't believe I'm not getting any traction!"

"I think we're in a super low spot," LeeAnn called back.

"This stuff is nasty. Let's try again," Gary said. A bee buzzed near his ear and landed on his neck. He brushed it away and rolled the window up almost to the top. "Damn bee," he said. "I hate bees."

He tried again, giving the truck a little gas, giving it a lot of gas, rocking it, coaxing it. He grunted, "Come on! Come on!" with each new effort. The whine of the tires in the mud would slow, the wheels would grab the grass, and he'd pull forward for a second. Then the truck would sink back and the tires would begin to spin again.

Gary thought of the pain as a poison. It began with little hints, ghosts of pain that nattered for his attention. It was better not to notice, because noticing was permission for the whole thing to bloom and seep through his entire body, thickening through the muscles of his back, down to his legs, up to his neck, until he simply had to give up, take the drugs that his new doctor had prescribed most recently, and go to sleep.

The worst was when he waited too long and took the drugs too late. Then he had the pain plus nausea in an unsortable mix which could only be resolved by throwing up. Gary shook his head involuntarily in disgust. He hated even to think about it. Then he reminded himself—as he always tried to—that there were people who were always in pain. There were people in worse pain.

He heard LeeAnn yell again. He looked up, and she was standing right next to him with her fist raised, ready to knock on the window. "Roll down your window!" she shouted.

"Holy...you scared me!" Gary yelled as he opened the window. "What's going on?" She was backing away. The edges of her brow were sweaty, and she had turned a shade of pink that he had never seen on her before this moment.

"The grass is on fire!" she shouted.

"What grass?" He looked out beyond her, and the grass looked just fine. But there was a smell that he began to understand.

“Underneath you,” she yelled. “Shut off the truck.”

He stuck his head out the window and caught sight of smoke slinking out from underneath the front fender.

“Holy shit! We’ve got to get the chain off of it—can I get out right here?”

“I’ve already taken off the chain,” LeeAnn said. “Pull out.”

Gary started up the truck again then grabbed his cell phone and shoved it out the window. “LeeAnn!” he shouted. “911!” The wheels spun. Fat billows of smoke appeared around the front of the truck.

“Get out of the truck!” LeeAnn yelled.

“I’m not getting out of the truck,” he said. “The truck is one year, eight months and seven days old. I’m not getting out of the truck.”

“Get out of the truck!” she yelled again.

“I’ve almost got it! I can feel it!”

“I’m gonna open the car door and I’m gonna pull you out!” LeeAnn yelled.

“Move away!” Gary shouted. It would take a good couple of minutes for the vehicle to begin to burn, wouldn’t it? Trucks should be at least as flame resistant as what, pajamas? His feet began to feel warm. The smoke had changed from gray to black and was sliding over the hood and sides. His peripheral vision was now almost entirely blocked. But the tires would grab hold, and in a second, he’d be out. He gripped the steering wheel tighter and pushed it, heaved his whole body into it, as if he could push the truck out from the inside.

Suddenly, his door swung open, and Gary felt LeeAnn grab his arm—damn, she was strong—and he turned. He saw the pale face, the giant, goggle glasses, peering at him through the thick, black smoke.

“Your vehicle is on fire, Barry,” Dr. Kaspar rasped, his bony fingers digging into Gary’s forearm. “Get the hell out.”

Gary was coughing, gagging on the stink of hot plastic and burning grass. He looked down at Dr. Kaspar’s legs and realized, with horror, that some of that smell was probably the doctor’s pleated khakis and leather shoes smoldering.

“Back up!” Gary yelled. LeeAnn pulled the doctor out of the way. For a split second Gary braced himself against the pain he anticipated, and then he jumped. He landed hard but didn’t fall. Then he tackled Dr. Kaspar and rolled with him, panicked that he had been responsible for setting a confused old man on fire. The grass scratched his face and neck. Dr. Kaspar gasped and coughed. The man is so thin, Gary thought; he was just bones in Gary’s arms. He felt the doctor’s tie fall across his face. Kaspar’s nice clothes would look terrible.

LeeAnn grabbed Gary’s shirt. “You’re both okay. Just get him up. We’ve got to get away from the truck. How full is the gas tank?”

“A third, maybe,” Gary grunted as they pulled Dr. Kaspar up.

“I’m all right,” the doctor was saying. “I’m singed, but I’m all right. Barry, you need to breathe. You’re all wet and you stink.”

“It’s Gary. The smell’s the catalytic converter and the plastic,” Gary said. “It got too hot and the grass is dry.”

“Well, this whole vehicular situation is your own damn fault,” Kaspar said.

“Yes,” Gary said, “it’s my own damn fault.” He pulled the doctor’s thin arm around his shoulders—LeeAnn slipped in on the other side—and they all but carried the man until they had gotten far enough away that they felt safe. The ground rose to a small hill, and they sat down. “I hear the sirens,” LeeAnn said.

Gary could see the fire truck coming. He could see his midnight blue, four-wheel drive truck burning. The sun was beginning to set. A few yards beyond the truck, the fire slowed as the breeze shifted. The Cadillac remained untouched, with a cuff of mud all along the bottom edge. It looked oblivious and unassailable.

“Dr. Kaspar, are you okay?” LeeAnn asked. “There’s an ambulance coming and all you have to do is sit here until it comes, all right? How did you get stuck out here, anyway? What were you doing out here in the field?”

The fire burst upward in brilliant flashes of red and orange. “Sweet God in Heaven!” Dr. Kaspar exclaimed through a cough.

“Gas tank,” LeeAnn and Gary said in unison.

“The beer,” LeeAnn said.

“The cake,” Gary added.

LeeAnn shook her head in disbelief. “Why did you have the window closed?” she asked.

“There was a bee,” Gary said.

The fire trucks and the ambulance started to make their way out into the field. Gary stood up and waved wildly with both hands to signal the drivers.

Dr. Kaspar took a thick breath. “I was out here because I saw a wild turkey, and I wanted to see it up close. Used to hunt them as a kid with my father.” He coughed hard.

Gary turned around and was relieved to see that LeeAnn had both arms around the man.

“I’m going to sit here with you,” LeeAnn said. “The paramedics are going to be here in a second. We’ll let Gary do the talking. He loves to do the talking.”

“You okay, Kaspar?” Gary asked. “You gonna be all right?”

Dr. Kaspar nodded. “I’m all right,” he said.

“He’s all right, I think,” LeeAnn said. “Shook up.”

“I’m A-okay,” Kaspar said, but his voice cracked.

“Dr. Kaspar, we’re going to sit here and breathe,” LeeAnn said. “We’re going to wait until they come to us.”

Kaspar was looking all right, Gary thought. His cheeks were getting some color. Gary bent down and kissed the damp crown of LeeAnn’s head, then took the doctor’s hand for a moment. He couldn’t tell whose was shaking more, but at least the older man’s hand didn’t feel clammy. “I’m gonna let ‘em know what happened. I’m not sure they can get the ambulance right up to us, so I’m gonna meet them. All right? LeeAnn’s staying right here with you. You’re in a good spot.”

Kaspar nodded. “The best,” he said.

The doctor sounded coherent. He sounded okay. Gary looked through the older man’s big, smudged, rectangular lenses and gave a nod of assurance. Kaspar blinked a few times and then gazed steadily back. Assured for the moment, Gary braced his hands firmly against his lower back and began to jog awkwardly toward the fire truck. He could feel the broad slab of pain climbing up and spreading into his shoulders. He heard LeeAnn from behind him, talking to Kaspar in her calm way. “There he goes,” she said. “He looks happy, doesn’t he?” ☞