

The Girl Under the Car

He did not see her stuck beneath the car when he left for work that morning.

He did not hear the shallow drop of blood as it dripped off the axle and onto the street below his Mercedes.

Had the accident happened only weeks before he certainly would have noticed her, or at least the drops of blood on his well-kept garage. But now his sleek and silver machine sat outside in the elements where any animal could mate with it, relieve itself, treat it as if it were meant to be out in the world and not covered by a wool cloth in the warm darkness of a covered home.

But everything from the previous night was a blur as if he were watching it through the brown liquid that he'd drunk.

Earlier that morning his hand hovered above the brown flecked carpet on a mission to locate his glasses, the ones he'd worn since his 20's, the ones that made the world clear, even on this blurry morning. But today Brick Keesling wouldn't find them in one of their usual spots, in his bed, on the floor or perched on his head. It would be more than an hour from the time he crawled across the space, military style, between bed and bathroom, through the brush of last night's clothing until he showered, shaved, found four Tylenol and two cups of black coffee from the bathroom espresso maker, that he would locate them in the cluttered cup holder in his cold car.

Still getting used to the quiet of the morning, without kids trampling around the house, no wife half-hazardly, and less than half-heartedly, blowing him a kiss as she ran out the door in her exercise clothes. Now the only sounds were the ones he made. The sound of his running water, the squeak of the shades being drawn, the clack of his shoe on the faux hardwood, the jingle of keys in his pocket.

Sometimes he'd drown the quiet of his morning with music from his iPad, but his head hurt too much today to bury anything. The sounds of his morning were stones he left along his routine.

The alarm clock, his beating heart, the water over his toothbrush, the jagged razor running down his cheeks, the shower pounding his head, the pop of the shampoo bottle top, the sound of the aspirin bottle exhaling. The purr of the car's ignition covered the sound of the groaning form he'd hit the night before. He pulled out of the car park, no car door thundering overhead. Sunglasses, god, he needed sunglasses.

The sun was strong, but it wasn't warm, still late March in the Northeast. Pulling out of the condo parking lot he felt the car tug to one side as if something, perhaps a branch, clung to the bottom. He slowed at the STOP sign and felt oddly fearful of what might be there. Scared of so much lately since he'd moved out, his first time alone since before their marriage. Too many times he'd told himself: "it's nothing." Just the wind, or an animal or the sound of the water through a neighbor's pipes.

The limbs he saw when he bent down, using his hand as a pad between his knee and the ground so as not to soil his last clean suit, were not from trees or bushes, nothing that lived outside. Instead it was a hand, attached to an arm, attached to a torso. He stopped looking.

Eyes filling with fear. Reworking the previous night, leaving the office, drinks at the bar, then nothing. Coming home, undressing, his glasses, nothing.

His mouth hanging open, Brick looked around and quickly got back in the car. He didn't know why, he'd say later. Panic, fear, a child's hope it would just go away.

He turned the radio up, maniacally pushing the buttons, one, then another, then another until hard chords of an electric guitar and the blaring drums blocked out all reality. He drove softly, as if every street were covered with speed bumps, not wanting to further disturb the body below.

Tucking the car into a flat space in his office garage, quickly turning the key and dropping it into his pocket. Without pausing to think he swiveled out and slammed the door, running toward the elevator that would lead to his office, his feet flapping on the cement, making as much noise as possible. He didn't want to hear anything.

Lawyers, paralegals and secretaries moved through his morning bringing things and taking them away, nobody actually talking to him until a lawyer name Lori came to his door and told him she'd received another call from his wife's lawyer. She spoke quickly, the sentences running into one another without periods, but he heard the words, "money" "custody" "visitation."

As soon as she sat down in one of the stiff leather chairs in front of his desk, he popped up without a word, his body over-heating. He splashed cold water on his middle-aged face, now noticing each curve and crinkle in the overbearing lights of the office bathroom.

He exited making a left toward the steps that led to the elevator and the parking garage.

The eleven o'clock in the morning quiet surrounded him until he heard nothing except the sounds of his own feet. Standing beside the car he shook, the sweat sticking his shirt to his back, the air chilling him up and down his spine. His heartbeat was palpable, the only other sound was the drip, drip, dripping of the blood. He kneeled down with his head under the car, his eyes tightly shut. Nothing to see, only the clap of a distant foot and the continuing drip, drip, drip. He opened one eye, then the other.

The woman's hair was the main feature, making her face appear small.

"Help me," she said, her voice full of liquid.

"What happened?" he asked, unmoved from his position.

"It hurts," she said again.

"I can't let you out," he said. Another ticket, another accident, he thought. I'll never see my kids again.

The phone buzzed in his pocket. It was Lori asking for him.

"I won't tell anybody," she said in a way that made him believe her.

He wanted to help her. Her face looked clear and clean, still full of neat make-up from the previous night. Everything else was ripped and torn, but what he saw was pretty.

"Can you wait?" he asked.

"I'm tired," she said.

"Can I get you something?" he asked.

"Water," she said.

He turned, hustling to the elevator and back up to his office and the kitchen where they stored the plastic bottles with the law firm logo. He rushed back down, tossing the cap as he ran, placing the drink within reach of a mangled arm.

"Thanks" was all she said.

Another email signified an impending meeting. He put the phone back in his pocket and left.

His day went on with remarkable normalcy, a series of mindless meetings and phone calls, the kind that pile one on top of the other, keeping him occupied until it was time to have a drink. His new schedule, with nowhere to go and no one to pick up, he'd been leaving the office later and later, 6:30 became 7:30. Under firm rules if you worked beyond 8:00 they'd buy dinner, so he'd wait even longer for the pleasure of having the firm buy him warmed pasta at his desk from Take-out Taxi. But food was not on his mind. At eight o'clock the halls were empty and most of the staff gone. It was clear to return to the garage and the reality he'd ignored.

Deep breaths in and out as he approached the car. At some point during the day, probably when the others ran out for lunch, he'd nodded off, really fell asleep at his desk, but now his head was clearer, and he hoped whatever happened that morning was over. Please be a dream, he told himself, a dream, be a dream. The now-empty water bottle had been tossed around by the moving cars, a game of spin the bottle amongst strangers. The bottle, all the confirmation he needed that like so much recently, it was not a dream, but more of his new reality, one he felt unprepared for.

"Hi," he said, softly, not wanting to disturb.

"Hi," she said, her voice stronger now, almost sultry.

He didn't know what else to say and so said nothing, a pain shooting up his leg as he kneeled on the hard floor.

"I feel better," she said, moving her torso to one side as if to stretch.

She didn't look better, he thought, her body partly invisible in the dim garage, distorted from light to darkness behind the muffler.

"Just talk to me," she said, closing her eyes.

And so they talked. He told her about the divorce, how he felt guilty for not missing the kids more.

"I mean, I miss them and everything. The quiet is hard and takes some getting used to."

She was single, although she'd had a good date the night he hit her. "I think he'll call again, I mean, he kissed me at the bar."

"Then how did we meet?" he asked, "I don't remember."

"You shouldn't have been driving," she said.

He knew it and said nothing.

"He dropped me off," she said, squinting a bit. "His name was Darren. So why was I outside?"

It was hard to see her so Brick took off his jacket, folded it neatly and used it as a pillow.

"That better?" she asked.

"Yea," he said.

"I'm glad you're comfortable," she said and they both laughed.

"I need to go home," he said. What he really wanted was some a drink.

"You told me you don't need to be anywhere. There's no one home."

"I'm hungry," he said. "You want some food?"

"Famished," she said. "But watch the bumps."

Again, laughter. The driving was slow, no traffic, but he kept the pace as if he were carrying a tray of full drinks in the back seat.

"An order of vegetable dumplings, Kung Pow chicken, white rice and half a bottle of Chardonnay," he told the small lady behind the counter at Taipei-a-Go-Go. He paced the series of blonde wood tables as someone unseen prepared the food. He walked to the window leaned down on one knee and looked out of the storefront to see how she was doing. He waved. She smiled, he thought.

The car filled with the smell of the food, making him more hungry as he drove the length of the condo community looking for a place to park, away from the commotion of his centrally-located two-bedroom, walk-up. He stopped the car in front of the "No Parking" sign at the very end, alongside the monstrous blue garbage dumpster. The spot where the curb met the woods from which the Falling Stones community was cut. He took a blanket from the trunk which covered his spare tire and spread it out on the dirt patch atop the curb. His already dirty jacket balled-up to support his head. He placed the containers of food on the ground, sliding a set of wooden chopsticks across the pavement, before pulling them back, "I got you a fork," he said, rummaging through the bag.

Her smile reminded him of his wife, it was unpretentious. Not the kind you make because you're expected to smile, like at a joke you don't find funny, but the smile suggesting comfort, contentment, pleasure in the moment.

He slid her a plastic cup filled three quarters of the way with white wine. It spilled as she drank, the physics of her position working too hard against her.

She laughed. It wasn't a full laugh, her lungs sounded as if they were unable to fill completely. She laughed at the way he fumbled with the chop sticks, "I could do better," she said.

"Be nice to me," he said. "There's a path to work that's all dirt roads."

There was no gallows in their humor, no darkness, just the levity of two people exploring the mind of another for the first time. The kind of first date you hope for, when your discussions defy time, the old jokes are new again, at least to this person and even as you tell them. So much had become verboten over time, so many topics, money, the kids, her parents, his drinking, nothing getting resolved.

He hadn't been on a date in 15 years, even since he'd moved out there were only some furtive emails and online gestures with former girlfriends. And now here they were, the unlikeliest find. How lucky he felt for this moment, when there was no spouse rolling her eyes at the story she knew too well, just the wide open face as it took in this information that is new and seemed infinitely interesting in the first telling.

But too soon it was dark and the temperature dropped and her eyes were closing.

"I'll let you sleep," he said. Her words, an incoherent mumble. Reaching toward her he pulled the plate and cup stuffing them into the bag from which they came. He scooted along the ground until he was beneath her, barely able to make out her face, feeling for a tight spot he stretched the blanket, tucking the edges into small places so it hung like a hammock below her, providing some warmth.

He walked along the winding blacktop whistling to himself, a mixture of pride and pleasure, as if he had done a good deed. At the base of the walk-up to his new home he took a four-foot jump shot with the garbage bag. The brown twist of refuse full of their first meal together sunk smoothly into the black cylinder full of the week's trash.

A bottle of Absolut vodka warmed on his night-stand. Brick smiled to himself about the night, replaying the conversation, the small jokes, the joy of the company. All the while his fingers were texting his sponsor that he'd made it through another day. "No drinking today, feeling good."

"I actually met somebody," he continued. "The best first date in a long while."

He passed out sometime after three in the morning. The sun drenched the room unimpeded, as if it didn't rise, but just appeared. He poured the remnants of his glass back into the near-empty bottle and returned it to the freezer where he kept it hidden from no one, under the packs of frozen peas.

It was the first clear morning he could remember. Even before he pulled his glasses out of his breast pocket he could see the names of the three books on his shelf, including *The Big Book*, he'd received on his first day of AA, *Goodnight Moon*, which he read to the kids when they slept over, and a well-worn copy of *Famous Legal Quips*, he used to use. This morning the wine and vodka from the previous night were no barrier to his enthusiasm for getting back to his car. He rushed easily through his morning rituals.

A brief moment of panic stung him when he left the building and his car wasn't in its usual space. Until he remembered where he left it. The feeling returned moments later as he reached the garbage dumpster at the end of the street.

"Where is it?" he screamed at the heavy Hispanic lady behind the counter at his condo office.

"I no, know," she said.

"It's gone," he said.

"Where you park?"

"At the end, by the dumpster. It doesn't matter."

"Where your car?"

"It must have been towed."

She picked up the phone and spoke quickly in Spanish. "Donde esta el coche?"

Her hand moved slowly over the small sticky note. He grabbed it squinting into the address and hustled to the main road where he hailed a cab. He pasted the small note to the steering wheel and yelled "go."

Sweating and uncomfortable now in his tight shirt and tie, with bright sunshine raining in on him, and without his sunglasses, his head hurt, even without the usual hangover severity. The car meandered across the city and through to a small snake of dirt roads that led to a chain link fence and a heavy man in dirty overalls who took his time coming out of the small office trailer. The fat man squinted into the car and saw Brick in his legal uniform and must have assumed he was the owner of the only car worth anything in the lot. He undid the lock and a heavy chain fell to the ground in a mass, allowing the cab through to the empty dirt patch. And there amidst a gaggle of burnt out clunkers that didn't look like they could drive out of the lot was his Mercedes, covered now in brown dirt.

The scenarios of what she had to endure raced through his mind, the long drag across town, the winding dirt road, the rocks and divots, the bumps, the disregard.

He dropped a series of twenty dollar bills in the front seat and sprung from the cab. He fell to all fours, his head stretching out from his neck like a turtle examining the car's underbelly.

But there was nothing. Not a remnant of her. A pair of light brown boots stirred the dust next to him, his eyes wide in disbelief but his mind firmly in the night before.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"Who?" the overall-ed man responded, breathing heavy from the walk.

"The girl," he said. "The girl under the car?"

"Rough night," the man said, cackling, his shoulders rising and falling.

"No. What?" he asked.

"It's a hundred fifty bucks for the car," he said.

"Where's the girl?" he said, standing toe to toe with him now.

"It's a hundred and fifty bucks, or get the hell off my lot."

Brick felt around his jacket for his wallet, handing the whole thing to the heavy man.

Brick's hand ran along the car bottom feeling for some sign of life along the belts and hoses, but there was nothing.

Now dusty from his shoes to his knees, he sat back in the car's heavy leather seat. The car smelled as if it wasn't his. Cigarette smoke, stale and old, as if someone had been smoking in the car all night with the windows closed. Stale like the meals he'd been eating late at night. Stale as the days.

He opened all the windows and drove slowly as if she were still there and then sped up quickly, over rocks and ditches, hitting each speed-bump with the same velocity as if they weren't there. He wanted to get back to the office, to a place where everything was real: his desk, his chair and billable hours. He patted the dust from his pants causing it to fly around in a swirl and then to the floor. Focusing on the feel of the plush carpet in his mahogany office, not the rancid Condo filled with non-English speakers and regulation brown speckled carpet. He belonged upstairs. He should be eating at steak houses, not on the parking lot floor.

Into the lot and down the ramp, one, then another and another his car sped until he found the spot from the previous day. He slowed the car stopping over the place where the blood was hardened. He turned the key and sat with the quiet kicking of a recently stopped car. Then on his knees again, and a final look, another touch of the rim and the pads, rubbing the residue between his thumb and forefinger. Bringing it to his nose he smelled it, looking for something, to renew a memory from the day before.

But there was nothing.

The scent of engine oil overwhelming. He leaned back on the car and the tears came for a moment. Pulling off his jacket he balled it up and slipped it under his head where he waited and watched before falling into a big sleep that lasted for hours.

The sound of smacking shoes running to their cars at lunch time sprung him from sleep, his brain unsure of where he was.

“Brick,” a woman from the office said, standing over him. He looked up at her, then rolled to his side for a final peek under the car before getting up and walking to elevator, his greasy jacket flung over his shoulder, brown dirt covering his shoes.

“I’m sorry about your wife,” she said.

“My wife?”

“They’ll find her,” she said, “I’m sure they will.”

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