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Change Machine

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Gum Stuck

She reached down to scrape the gum off again, and I guess I pushed her harder than I meant to. She stood back up and blinked in shock as I stepped in front of her to protect them. Then she shook her head, grabbed her shoe that had slipped off, and crashed out the door. Then the next door. I didn't follow her to the car. I was disappointed we hadn't been arguing in the bathroom. Whenever our fights started there, I'd get to hear her slam three doors on the way out. That's the record. You can't slam any more doors on your way out than three no matter where you are. Any house or apartment gets three slams maximum, a room in a room in a room. It doesn't seem like nearly enough.

After she'd been gone a few hours, I checked the gum, and I could have sworn they were closer together, even stretching out to touch. I scratched a line into the wood with my fingernail to mark where they were so I'd know for sure if they really were moving. There was still about three inches of wood between them. Two pieces of gum, one blue, one pink, teeth marks and shine like tiny brains, as if a child had cracked open the heads of two favorite toys, one boy, one girl, and found the insides to be frighteningly real.

My throat still hurt from yelling and my stomach bubbling dangerously low, I checked the 'fridge to find nothing but a jar of brine with a couple pickle stems bobbing in the back like something forgotten in a lab. Once, when I stopped her from throwing out that jar, I begged her to leave it alone for a year to see if the stems could grow more pickles. She shook her head and asked when I was gonna grow up and start buying groceries. It was a good question.

Dumb Struck

I'm driving around thinking that stealing a car for such a ridiculous reason is exactly the kind of thing that makes you assign crazy nonsense all sorts of significance. Of course, people I've known would sigh and say that I've been doing that all my life.

But after opening up a strange vehicle so easily, I'm thinking maybe keys are just an illusion of security, that maybe any of them will open any car at all.

It couldn't be chance. Dumb luck? No one is that lucky.

The gas tank isn't low, but I stop to fill up anyway. It started with a full tank, a nice surprise, like finding a plane ticket in a glove box. But it feels good giving it gas, like I'm making an investment, like I'm planting a flag and proving my right to drive, feeding the horse I stole instead of just riding it to death like they do in the westerns. They don't hang you for that, right?

As I reholster the nozzle, I notice a sign on the gas pump that reads:

"Stealing fuel could cost you your license!"

I stare a minute, then get so disgusted by this threat that I try to get the attention of the teenager on the other side of the pump.

"Hey, you see that?"

"What?"

For some reason she steps back and looks at the bottom of his shoe, making me wonder what happened the last time someone said those words to her. I rap the pump with a knuckle, keeping my bad hand hidden.

"No, that. Right there."

She reads the sign.

"So?"

"So? Doesn't that make you mad?"

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't make any sense. That's like saying, "'Stealing a car could cost you your fingers.'" She puts away her nozzle and opens her car door, lost in thought. She turns to me before she climbs in.

"No, it's not like that."

"Why not?"

"It's more like saying, "Stealing a television could cost you your glasses." Then she closes her door and is gone before I can tell her she's right. That's exactly what it means.

Love Tied

Then there was that pregnant girl. Well, maybe it was stealing the car. No, if I had to narrow it down, I would say neither was more important than the other. Except maybe putting my key in the wrong ignition and finding they fit.

I never for a second thought it would work. I mean, what are the chances? Seriously? I'd love to look someone in the eye and proudly declare that I did something as dangerous as stealing a car that day. But the truth is, I only drove off in it because I didn't want to look stupid.

I was in the grocery store looking for some pickles, and I saw this girl I used to know. She was turning around right when my mouth was forming a "hello," and that's when I noticed that she was approximately eight months, three weeks, and two days pregnant. A carnival barker couldn't have guessed more accurately. Pointing to her stomach then my jar, she's like, "Pickles, huh? How funny is that?" Then we walked around together for awhile, and I helped her grab stuff off the high shelves. After a few more lanes, I got comfortable walking around with her giant stomach, so I dropped my juice in her shopping cart and started pushing it around for both of us. We talked. She was married and happy, and I saw she had all four food groups in her cart. I told her I hadn't seen a cartload like that since I rode under one with my grandma pushing it. I told her I'd chew on the ends on the onion stalks that hung down through the cart, and my grandma used to yell out, "How'd a rabbit get in here?" Then, after a third lap around aisles we'd already been through, I started to notice that when other shoppers looked at us, they clearly assumed we were together. They seemed pleased we still had so much to talk about at this stage in our relationship. Maybe that's why I walked around the store with her for so long, to pretend I had a pregnant, happy wife, just for the afternoon. But I have no idea why she did it.

We rolled around about an hour, putting checkmarks down a long, long grocery list, even penciling in some extra stuff at the bottom. And even though there was a spot in the margin on her list where her husband had scrawled a note ("don't forget the light bulb!") our illusion was never broken, and she seemed to be letting me enjoy it.

Then we were in the spotlight of the sun, and I was so distracted watching her walk to her van that I marched up to the wrong car and put my key into the door. The key unlocked it easily, and I sat in the driver's seat for at least five minutes before I even realized where I was.

On the outside, the car looked exactly like mine. Green, squat, orange brake dust on the rims, antenna crooked from being bent and bent back. Inside, however, it was like waking up in a strange bed. It reminded me of my old roommate Gary, who once contracted a hilarious combination of drunkenness and sleepwalking our first night in our new dorm. He wandered off and woke up down the hall next to a fish tank half full of water, dead fish, and dirty silverware. Then he just sat in the middle of the floor waiting for me to wake up and tell him where the fish came from. We'd just met the day before and had only one day to memorize faces room numbers. With nine floors of identical bunks and pastel-colored waiting-room furniture, that wasn't enough time.

He stayed down in that other room for half the day before a guy who actually lived there finally came back from exploring campus and explained he wasn't me. Gray came stumbling back to our room, exclaiming, "I puked in a fish tank today, dude! Has the world gone crazy?!" Later, he told me he'd never been more confused in his life and kept waiting, weeks later, for me to tell him I wasn't really his roommate either.

Point is, that's exactly how I felt when I looked around the inside of that car. But it didn't last. It was the windshield that finally convinced me I was lost. So clean that it was almost invisible, and not a spider web of cracks to be found anywhere. And then I saw the 8-ball air freshener hanging off an undamaged rearview mirror and knew I should probably run.

I was getting ready to bail when the pregnant girl pulled up next to me to wave goodbye one last time. And that's when I smiled like an asshole, waved back, and put the key in the ignition, fully expecting it to jam about halfway.

I couldn't believe it when it slipped in and the car started up. I sat there idling, ready to shut down and jump out any second. But the long line of traffic leaving the lot kept her van creeping along within sight for so long there was no way I was going to let her see me getting back out to unlock a second car. No way I was gonna stand there shrugging and waving to her like some mental patient.

So I thought I'd drive around the block once or twice. Then, once she was gone, I'd bring the car back and hope nobody saw me. Instead, I followed her out onto the highway and ended up so far away from the store that I just kept going.

And when she finally disappeared down an exit ramp, I shook my head and started checking to see what radio stations were programmed, amazed that I'd just stolen a car simply so I wouldn't have to embarrass myself in front of some girl I would never see again.

Tongue Struck

I find a car wash, thinking this will further establish the vehicle as my own, and try to feed the machine a five dollar bill. It's telling me to "insert coins only" so I go over near the vacuum pump and see a big green box marked simply "Change."

I sigh, having had bad luck with vending machines lately, worse than a slot machine, always trying for potato chips and getting the ancient 1975 chewing gum off the dusty bottom row instead. Someone else must have had the same problem, too, because an angry note finally appeared on it that read, "If this machine was used by air traffic control instead of just giving out tasty snacks, there'd be hundreds dead." I don't doubt it. I put the five bucks in the horizontal slot, and it spits it back out. Without thinking, I drop a quarter in the vertical slot and stand there staring. I put my ear close to the box. Nothing. It apparently doesn't make change, just takes it from you. Not exactly false advertising.

I start laughing and give it another quarter so I can yell to a passing car:

"Hey, notice anything different?"

On my way home in the stolen car, I'm suddenly worried what happened to own vehicle. I decide to flip a coin to decide whether to go back. My brother used to tell me it was impossible to flip a coin without a thumb. He was wrong. But the quarter does fly off my middle finger, ricochets off my chin, and disappear out the window into the dark.

At the end of the road, there's a parking garage in the middle of an overgrown field of weeds, the last thing to be torn down on in a dead stretch of city too far from the heart to stay alive. When I was little, my brother and I would ride my bike out there, watching the trees and building along the streets get darker

and older and slump to the side. It reminded me of when I'd put rubber bands tight on the tips of all my fingers to watch them turn red and the kindergarten teacher who ripped them loose so hard her fingernail cut a half-moon along my pinkie. She screamed something about my fingers falling off if I cut off the circulation too long, then laughed and said I should put one on my tongue instead.

But when I'd finally ride my bike to that parking garage, I'd try to get enough momentum to make it up that snaking ramp. I never had the strength or the guts to go all the way to the top, but it seemed like a victory anyway. My legs usually ran out of gas about a third of the way up.

So now I'm driving to the top, checking my gas gauge nervously, wondering how far I've gone. The guts. My brother once told me through the door that the human intestine is curled up so tight that it's three miles long when you unwrap it. He also swore our tongues actually stopped halfway down our throats. The ramp in this garage is just like that. Stretched out, I decide it would extend to either ocean.

Then the sun is suddenly blinding me and I'm on the roof. The headlights blink off and I step out of the car, tracing a scratch along the hood, feeling an engine running hot enough to melt through metal. Looking down over the edge, I see the trees have shrugged off their leaves and I see more roads than I ever have before. And on these roads are hundreds of splashes of color dotting the pavement in every direction. Is there really that much roadkill in the world? Why aren't they all red? I'd like to say I rubbed my eyes and the colors went away.

About

David James Keaton's fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Needle*, *Beat To A Pulp*, *Pure Slush*, and *Crime Factory*, among others, and his coach-killing contribution to *Plots With Guns* #10 was named a Notable Story of 2010 by *South's Million Writer's Award*. He was also recently nominated for *Spinetingler's Best Short Story* on the web, so if you're reading this in April of 2012, go vote. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Flywheel Magazine*, and once he totally climbed in the wrong car and sat there awhile so he wouldn't look stupid. He can be found at davidjameskeaton.com.