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The Apartment Is Locked

Gary Erwin

After it was plowed, the snow in the parking lot of my apartment complex drifted into sharp edged drifts. One morning I heard my neighbor driving his truck through it in the back yard, the whine of the engine below my balcony rattling the window panes. I tried to explain to Jacob that his cousin drove it while intoxicated but he wouldn't believe me.

"Jake, the idiot was drunk and wouldn't leave with me. I mean, look..."

I walked to the balcony door, which overlooked a drifted mass of wet snow on the side of our apartment building. A brown Chevy pickup was imbedded in a five foot snowdrift and brown streaks of mud lay behind the rear wheels. I pointed to the truck. "See. He drove around the building and planted that piece of shit in the snowdrift, just because he wanted to see if it would make it through. Does a normal human being ever do that?" I asked.

Jacob looked out of the door window and gazed at the truck with dull eyes.

"God, Adam, everybody does that at least once in their life, come on." He laughed but it shortly died away.

"I've never done that," I said.

"Oh, well sorrrrrrry, masa, I forgot you's *perfect*," he sputtered, frowning.

Back to the couch he walked, then slumped into it.

"Look, let's forget about last night and concentrate on what to do tonight, okay?"

I was tired, unsure if I had enough energy to withstand another weekend night, but since it was the weekend I didn't want to sit home. All the talk about Elie moving in was exhausting me even more. I figured something exciting could happen, like I'd meet the girl of my dreams or find a wad of money. Whenever I was tired on weekends I'd always think about those things and they'd never happen. Yet I'd still go out.

"Hum, well...we can go to the Hildem again. They've got the Astros playing. They're supposed to be excellent. Whattaya say?" I asked.

Jacob scratched his chin and puckered. He inhaled his cigarette, leaned forward and crushed it in the ashtray.

"I'll go, but I promised Elie that I'd help get his truck out this afternoon, Okay?" he said, his eyes shielded underneath his puffy eyelids.

"Fine."

Elie spit a stream of brown tobacco juice onto the left rear tire as he passed it. In his hands he held two beer bottles, one still filled with beer, the other by tobacco juice.

With a loud grinding, the truck turned over and he revved the engine as high as it could go. My ears rang.

After a few minutes Jacob yelled, "Okay, Elie, that's enough!"

Elie got out. His cheek looked like he had a golf ball in it. When he smiled I could see brown bits of chewing tobacco threaded between his teeth. In his hands were the bottles. He dropped his gravy colored saliva into one bottle and took large swigs from the other. It was vulgar to watch. Sometimes I'd feel ill when he did that.

"Well, cuz' you talk to your bud up there?" he probed, smiling at Jacob.

Perched on Elie's head was a green John Deer hat stained with black grease spots.

"Yeah, but play it cool, he's not sure yet."

Elie crouched before the left rear tire and shoved a wood plank under it. "If we rock the bitch then she'll most likely give, I bet."

"Okay, let's try it," Jacob said.

Elie walked back to the cab, stepped into it and started the engine. I opened the balcony door an inch or two so I could hear what they were saying to each other more clearly. I figured they were bound to speak in more detail about Elie's living situation for next year. I stood at the door watching the two attempt to move the truck but in the wet snow the vehicle was out of its atmosphere. It rocked back and forth and the right rear wheel coughed up mud, painting Jacob's jeans a deep brown. The plank under the left wheel splintered and the shredded wood scattered over the snow.

"Hold it, Hold It!" Jacob yelled.

The engine died down, then Elie stepped out of the truck. As he walked back to Jacob he spit and walked into it. It landed on his boot but he didn't notice. Jacob crouched before the left rear wheel, staring at the brown indentation in the earth the tire had produced.

Elie crouched next to him. "Well, whatta ya think? Think we can get her to move, or what?"

Jacob caressed his chin hairs.

"What we need is some salt. It's warm enough out that it'll melt the snow, you know."

Elie stood up and spat. He took his hat off, wiped his forehead with the back of his greasy hand. "Well, hell, cuz, I've got some in my storage closet," he said.

Jacob stood up, gave Elie a bewildered look, then walked to the storage closet. He returned with a small sack and handed it to Elie.

"Here, spread some of this shit under the tires. I'll drive."

Elie dug his hand into the bag, brought out a handful of salt and threw some under each tire.

"Okay," he gurgled, "give her a try."

The truck rocked but didn't move. Gears ground and blue smoke puffed from the exhaust. Jacob stopped the engine, then walked back to Elie. The two stood looking at the rear wheels.

"Elie, I think you're gonna need a wrecker to pull it out," Jacob declared, shaking his head.

Elie peered at the wheels and chuckled.

"Cuz, I ain't got no money to pay for a wrecker," he announced.

Jacob clenched his face. Whenever he did this I pitied anyone who had to suffer his impetuous whining.

"God, Elie, you drive this thing into a snowdrift and now you say you don't have any money to get it out? What the hell is wrong with you?"

As soon as Jacob said that his face relaxed. Elie stopped smiling and looked off into the dead field in front of the snowdrift. Clouds of snow, lifted from the wind, whipped around the dry cornstalks like white tornadoes. I'd never seen such a determined look in Elie's face before, not even when he spoke about different brands of chewing tobacco or beer.

"All right, all right, let's try something else."

Jacob scanned the parking lot, absorbing all that he saw in one swift turn.

"I think we can get it if we maybe shovel some of the snow out of the way."

They walked to the general storage locker opposite the drift, about twenty five feet away. My car was parked next to the closet and inside the small wood storage were two shovels. Both frowned as they walked back. They dug around the tires until the brown grass appeared, and then Jacob laid salt into the exposed areas.

"Okay, it should work. Get in and start it up."

"Cuz', you really think Adam wouldn't let me live with you's next

year?" Elie asked, walking back to the cab.

Jacob studied the white pellets of salt in the brown grass. His cousin sat in the truck playing with the radio tuner, passing every station on the dial. Jacob walked over to him and rested against the side of the truck.

"I don't know, Elie. I'm trying to persuade him but you know Adam, he won't do anything unless he's gotta reason."

He looked at the snow and Elie rested his chin on the steering wheel.

"Well, if it's 'cause I'm a pig, I can straighten up, that's no problem," he said.

I smiled and thought that at least Elie wanted me to like him. He'd never attempted that or any other form of responsibility before and I knew he wouldn't have if he didn't have the chance to move in with Jacob and me.

The truck erupted into a loud whine, its hind wheels digging furiously into the brown grass, flinging blades and mud onto the snow. It rocked back and forth. On its forward motion, Jacob stepped behind and gave it an extra shove.

The sight of the two cousins working together was ironic. Elie was a pig, a drunk. He always smelled like wintergreen chewing tobacco even when he wasn't chewing, and his lip was permanently extended from his mouth in a pout. His only goals in life seemed to be to chewing tobacco until cancer set in and drinking more beers than any human is capable of consuming. Nothing, it seemed, demanded his attention more than these two things.

And behind the truck, pushing, heaving, sweating in the cold winter, was his cousin, with mud splattered all over his jeans. If my car was trapped in the snow and Jacob was getting mud all over his clothing, he'd whine and complain. But with Elie he was more patient, less open to speculation about his cousin's actions than anyone else.

"Wo, wo, Elie, stop!" Jacob yelled above the engine.

The wheels began gripping the mutilated earth. He moved to get a better angle to push the truck so that when it moved he wouldn't fall forward into the mud.

I stepped onto the porch and rested on the railing.

"How's it going?" I yelled.

Elie glanced up at me, displaying a wide grin of white teeth enclosed in brown gums.

"Hey, why don't you come down and give us a hand, Adam," Jacob asked.

I looked at Elie, then back to Jacob.

"It's just about out anyway. We could use the extra shove," he said, opening his eyes wide.

"All right, I'll be down in a second."

I walked into the apartment, put my shoes on, got my jacket and gloves and went downstairs.

It was damp and humid outside. The snow was wet and in some spots icy, the kind of ice that looks okay when you're driving on the highway and suddenly the car slides into a ditch. Its dull shine reflected off the sidewalk and parking lot. As soon as I walked on the snow it compressed down and my boot didn't pick any up with the tread.

I walked over to Jacob. He stood behind the truck, groping at the ground with his boot for a good position. I stood at his left, placed my hands on the bumper and waited for Elie to start rocking the truck.

"Okay, Elie, go ahead," Jacob's voice boomed.

The truck whined and its rear wheels dug into the ground, spitting crumbs of earth on our pants and on the snow.

After minutes of rocking, Jacob asked, "Adam, why can't my cousin move in with us?"

We heaved and sweated and I said, "Well, I guess I don't really have a reason, except that I'm not sure he has the money. But maybe you'd know more about that than me."

Jacob grunted. The truck shot a wad of mud a bit high and it covered his hand.

"I think he can get the money if he really wants to move in with us, you know," he said, wiping his hand on a dry patch of his jeans.

"What's he spend it on anyway?" I asked.

We pushed and I could feel the muscles in my arm tightening.

"Well," Jacob began, "he likes to party, you know that, maybe a bit too much."

We rocked the truck harder and it was beginning to move.

"See, Jake, that's just it. With his partying all the time, I don't know if he'd be able to stay in school. I don't even know how he's been able to stay in school the last three years. I mean, maybe he's got a problem."

Jacob stopped pushing and stood up. He frowned at me, like I was a stranger. I continued to rock the truck. I considered what Elie said about being a pig and straightening himself up. It was comforting to hear him say it because I'd have some statement to judge him by if in fact he did move in, a sort of escape mechanism. I could press this against any action of his that affected me in the least and then maybe I

could help him overcome it.

"He doesn't have a problem, Adam, *God*, why do you always have to bring that up, Jeez," Jacob whined.

The rear tires produced a cloud of white smoke that smelled like burned bologna. They made a deep grinding noise and bits of grey rock piled up on the edges of the trenches they created.

I stepped back and watched the truck hop over the drift. Jacob kept looking at me as it shook and when it landed it shot into the carport, colliding with the back end of my car.

Elie sat in the idling truck without moving. His head didn't move and the brake lights were still on.

Jacob closed his eyes without turning his head towards the truck and I could hear him breathing, heavy and deep.

Elie backed the truck up. Then my bumper dropped to the ground . It sounded like a piece of tin foil being ripped.

He stepped from the truck. He looked at my car. He walked to the bumper and attempted to put it back on, but it fell off again. He stood staring at the rust spots. He touched it with his foot, his eyes twitching rapidly as he looked at me.

"God, Adam, I'm sorry. I guess...I guess I shoulda seen my truck doing that. Sorry," Elie stammered.

He looked down and put his finger into his mouth. He removed the chunk of tobacco, let it drop into a puddle, and the water turned brown at once.

I looked at my car with my mouth open. The cold air numbed my teeth but I didn't care. Jacob stood next to me with his head down like it was his fault. I sighed. I shook my head. Then I walked back into my apartment and locked the door behind me.