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TAKING CARE

Jane Scoville

“Don’t throw your gum out the car window,” Brad’s voice startled her.

Val, lost in her own thoughts, unaware of the scenery, radio, even her own family, turned to him; but his eyes were focused straight ahead on the road before them. “Why not?” she asked, holding the sticky wad in mid-air now, not quite knowing what to do with it.

“I’ve told you,” he half-glanced her way and groaned. “It sticks to tires of other cars. It’s a horrible mess. Nothing disgusts me more than gum on my tires.”

She stuffed the wad back in her mouth, but she felt more like a child than the thirty-year-old mother of two that she was. What did *she* care if it stuck to somebody’s tires? There was fresh oil, gooey mud, dead birds — what more was a little piece of gum? Rolling the wad around in her cheek, she felt a kind of paralysis — ridiculous to argue about this, but just as crazy to give in to his opinion. She’d just do what she usually did — slip it out the window when he wasn’t looking. And, hopefully, one of the kids wouldn’t make some comment from the backseat.

She turned to see them — glassy-eyed with stereo headphones firmly in place. But Derick caught his mother’s eye. “Can we stop for dinner soon, Mom? I’m hungry,” he asked too loudly. It seemed he was always hungry — maybe it had something to do with being ten.

“Brad, are you hungry? The kids and I want to get something to eat soon.”

“Sure, anything you guys want is fine with me. There’s a MacDonald’s right up ahead, but I don’t really want to eat there.”

“Why not, Dad? Let’s eat at MacDonald’s,” piped up Cindy, free of her headphones now and ready for lunch. Almost a teenager, Cindy liked to assert her opinions also. To Val, it seemed her husband and daughter were constantly arguing. It tired her to hear it.

“Their french fries are pure grease. The hamburgers are saturated with salt. It’s poison, Val, it really is.”

“Poison is fine with me, Brad, go ahead and pull in,” Val urged.

“I don’t know why they can’t have a nice cafeteria somewhere with plenty of vegetables. The American public is killing themselves with this junk,” Brad continued as he wheeled the old brown Toyota into one of the farthest parking places. A little inconvenient maybe, but door dents could be avoided.

Big Macs, fries, pies, malts later, they were back in the car again, chatting, fixing books and radios and sunglasses, and then — just sitting. “I’m not starting the car until everyone is buckled up. I’m not kidding either, Val. If you don’t want to use them when I’m not in the car, that’s your business, but it’s stupid.”

Val heard the kids groan and snap their belts. She hesitated to do the same. Of course it was incompetent to avoid seat belts — she knew it. “Sometimes I just don’t wear it, that’s all. Sometimes I do. So what?”

“So what? So you can kill yourself with just that one time you don’t. They’re useless unless you use them every time.”

“Come on, Dad,” Derick whined. “It’s getting hot in here.”

The stickiness of the August heat was as oppressive as the conversation. Val rolled down her window and glanced at the family approaching the next car — an already overweight woman, smiling and slurping a chocolate sundae; a man lighting his pipe, while several children chased each other around the car. Time to move on. Val snapped her seat belt shut.

Brad flipped the radio to WFMT, classical music. They could all use a little culture, he’d decided years ago. Val smiled as she pictured herself with Walkman and phones like the kids in the backseat. Easier to just tune in to her own mind.

A nice, long menthol cigarette would be perfect now, but she did not want to be offensive to the rest of the family. And she certainly did not want to hear any of the latest statistics on lung cancer or dangers to the nonsmoking associate of the smoker. She reached in her purse for another stick of gum. As she felt the sugary mint flavor ooze over her fillings, caps, and root canals, she began to suppose that gum chewing was unintelligent too.

She didn’t care about that either. Maybe if you analyzed life the way Brad had, you just came out pretty damned boring.

Was he? She glanced over at him. So serious. So conscientious. God, it must take a lot of energy to be so careful all the time. Still, the exercise and diet had paid off beautifully in his appearance — he looked better than he had when they’d married thirteen years ago.

His legs were muscular, his waist trim, his chest full. He was a very handsome man. She reached over and gently placed her hand on his knee.

He glanced at her, but she felt suddenly awkward and wished her hand were back on her own side of the car.

“What’s wrong, Brad?”

“Oh, nothing, honey,” he said as he patted her finger tips. “Except just be careful about touching me when I’m driving. You could cause an accident if the driver isn’t expecting it and it takes his attention off the road.”

Val snapped her hand back and exploded. “God, Brad, I don’t believe this! I suppose you could cause a Third World War if you happened to call the White House and your call got through and Reagan had his hand on the panic button and he was startled by your call and pushed it and it would all be your fault.”

Brad just rubbed his forehead — as if sometimes the illogic of the logic of this woman was too much. “Look, honey, let’s not argue, OK? Lets just enjoy this trip with the kids and not bitch about all the small stuff.”

“Ok, Brad, just concentrate on your driving — forget it.”

What would life have been like, Val wondered, if she had married someone different? Brad was so unlike most of the men she’d dated — the carefree, joke-telling types who had always been fascinated with her casual nature, her quick wit. With Brad it had been evenings of serious discussions. Discussions that somehow attracted and filled her too. Brad had seemed to know so much.

Well, why think like this? They had two lovely children in the backseat right now who were being completely ignored as they filled their heads with rock music. What did that do to them, she wondered. Probably more corrosive than MacDonald’s salt and grease.

Val twisted in her seat and succeeded in interesting them in a time-passing game of UNO. Blue, Red, Draw 4 — Suddenly she felt the door handle jam into her side as her body was thrown against the door.

“What’s going on, Brad? What are you pulling off the road for?”

“Why do you think?” he shouted, as he swung the car to a halt and flipped off the motor. His eyes flashed as he blurted, “I’m sick of this disrespect. No one listens to me. Don’t you think I see that belt? You snap it so I’ll drive you to your mother’s and then just flip it open when you think I’m not looking. Ridiculous!”

“Brad, I wasn’t even thinking. I just took it off so I could turn around to play cards with the kids.”

“Yeah, that sounds like you. Not thinking.”

“Dad, Mom, please,” Cindy cried. “This is embarrassing. What if somebody we know drives by? Come on. Let’s go. We’re going to get to Grandma’s just in time to go to bed.”

“Just put your seat belt on,” Derick asked simply.

“Why does everything have to be your way, Brad? What makes

you right all the time?" Val felt her throat tighten as she continued, "Because if you're always right, Brad, somebody's wrong. I'm tired of being that somebody."

"Oh, don't over-dramatize, Val. You do these things just to spite me, don't you? Is it too much to ask that you wear a Goddam seat belt? Statistics are obvious on this — anybody with any sense at all buckles up

"Brad, it's my life."

"No, Val, it isn't. You're *my* wife — *their* mother. How can you be so irresponsible? We need you."

"I'm sorry, you're right," Val sighed. "I just don't think. Let's go now."

He felt for the key, watched her snap the belt, started the motor, and then looked both ways before pulling back into traffic.

The kids felt for their headphones. Brad fixed his eyes on the road. Val wondered what had just happened. She was confused and shaky. But he had said he needed her. He was a good husband. Not many men cared as much as he did. She leaned her head against the headrest and closed her eyes But what did a man like that, who knew so much, need *her* for? And, under the cover of darkness, she released the belt, swallowed her gum, and slept.



Frank V. Slepicka