

The Abandoned, the Alone, and the Left Behind

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Rolling past the gates of my apartment complex, I trip the left turn signal and pull up to the main road. Not a second after big-toeing the brake pedal, the anti-lock brake system crunches and groans, as if melodramatically warning me to turn right *the hell* around. A winter weather warning has been issued, I know. But I don't, at this point, know why. I don't know that in just the last hour, a light rain had briefly fallen, then temperatures plunged below freezing, spreading a lacquer of ice, laced with oil, atop the pavement. But I have promised my parents that we'll make it over for dinner. So the four of us pull out in a small Chevy sedan—my girlfriend, our two little dachshunds, and I.

In slips and skids, we make it to the road just uphill of my parents' neighborhood. There, the four-lane road sprouts a fifth off to the right, so that cars can slow down before turning into the entrance. Veering over, I crank us into low gear and feather the brake, just so. We slide.

Slipping quickly now, my field of view narrows to a pinpoint and my thoughts whiz. Images of the potential outcomes fan out before me like so many rivulets—until the front right wheel slams against the curb and collapses these forking paths into one. The bumper leaps at once onto the grass. So I stomp on the brake, and we skid to a stop. Wide-eyed, we turn toward each other and remember that, yes, it is permissible to breathe. Then, there's that... *smell*. The stench of road burn and battery acid sizzles out of the mangled fender.

We grab what we can and run away from the street, fearing a gas leak or another car skidding off. Or, heaven forbid, both. No tow trucks will be able to take my car until the next day, so we leave it alone on the side of the road, hazards blinking, like a beacon in the night.

There is an apocryphal tale of the former Israeli politician Moshe Dayan, who (and this is the *un*-apocryphal bit) had lost his left eye during the Second World War while peering through his binoculars... straight down the barrel of a Vi-chy-French sniper. Some years later, Dayan was stopped for speeding by a military police officer. "I have only one eye," he pleaded in his defense. "What do you want me to watch—the speedometer or the road?"

I am fortunate enough to have both of my eyes, so, while one watches the road, the other often looks to the shoulder, where interesting things tend to occur. I might try to glimpse the faces of people pulled over, curious whether they're ashamed or anxious or upset. Maybe two burly gentlemen are tilting at each other over some perceived offense, on the brink of duking it out right there and then.

More often, though, and ever since I can remember, I've been most intrigued by cars left abandoned on the side of the road. Each one begets a question, and in its answer, a story.

How far has your owner gone? Did he run out of gas on the way home? Was this just his luck—the last goddamned straw? How long did she wait, wondering whether, and whom, to ask for help? What did they carry with them? What clues, what secrets, do you harbor?

You'll find them everywhere if you look, not just on the roadside. Like a compass needle, my eyes are drawn to a darkened lot with a lonely gray pickup sat dead, inexplicably, in the center; to a sunburnt sedan lurking on the fourth floor of a parking garage, with flat front tires and a manifold of parking tickets stuffed under the wiper.

Does the parking official believe these will someday be paid? Does he merely fulfill his role, believing, like the rest of us, that whoever oversees things will eventually take action?

I'm not sure whether I find it more or less ominous when those same solitary cars are occupied. I sometimes drive by an elementary school near my apartment, and have more than once seen a single car parked far, far back—back by the playground—late at night. Just idling. Of course, we can't linger too long on these questions, these feelings, as we usually have places to get to if we're driving, and our thoughts are soon pulled in unplanned directions.

But if we do allow ourselves to linger a little longer, perhaps we shouldn't be surprised to find cars in such solitary and haphazard situations, in places we think people have no business being. For our cars are much more than mere means. They, like us, contain multitudes and contradictions.

The car is a liberation, a method of swift escape. At the same time, it is a deathtrap, a two-ton mass of charging steel. It is a refuge for the night or a temporary home. A place to sleep off the alcohol. Or, perhaps, to take a nap between the longer legs of a road trip.

The car is a viewfinder. You can perch it on a cliff and look out to a distant skyline, or lay under the moonroof and draw shapes among the stars. It is a privacy for young lovers and adulterous trysts. But a privacy, mind you, that can be invaded—forced to go where cries cannot be heard. A car can roll up slowly like a creep in the darkness. The buzz of a rolling-down window can perk up your ears. It is a mobile store, an update on the medieval street vendor hiding under coat so many baubles and trinkets. A place of buying and selling. Of being bought and sold. Of rearview-mirror-looking and unspeakable acts.

The first car is a thankless teacher, a pensioner giving his final, bone-tired days to teenage whimsy; bruised, dented, trashed, run roughshod 'til the transmission develops a bronchial wheeze and sputters black bile from its innards. While the luxury car is a midlife dream nigh achieved, worn down and faded but still held close, handwashed weekly by undocumented immigrants—its owner standing over them, watchful and imposing. The final car is a harbinger of finitude, missing exits more and more and getting lost on the way home. It portends the loss of independence and the walls closing in: *First, they'll take your license, then your car, then your home. Then they'll tow you away and strip you, like a carcass, for parts.*

Such is the whole of human life entwined with the car.

People even seem to *look* like their cars: sleek, knife-edge jawlines sporting black and chrome-plated suits; heat-damaged hoods like lined foreheads, pockmarked by drug abuse and hard labor in the sun; minivans sagging low and heavy, hunched by the burdens of childbirth and the weight of multiplying responsibilities. This phenomenon must, I think, originate in that Man, like God, fashioned the car in his own image. Two lights like bright eyes shine from either side of the face, a touch above the grill, which smiles or scowls or bares its metal teeth. The side mirrors peek out like tiny ears astride the windshield, behind which sits the brain, the driver. That homuncular ghost inside the great machine. Even the guts of the car, that twisting convolution of compartments and tubes, resemble the organs and intestines and the vessels running through them.

And I say “Man” deliberately. For the quintessentially *feminine* car is built, if not overly dainty (see: the miniature coupe) or voluptuous (see: the Beetle), then frumpy and sexless (see: the aforementioned minivan), while no car may be more quintessentially *masculine* than the modern-day pickup—the length and breadth of its protruding bed seeming to correlate exactly with how infrequently it is put to practical use. Who but men could contrive such a scheme?

I recently read a story in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* about the city's worsening problem with abandoned vehicles, about which officials receive over four thousand complaints per month. Over four thousand. That's the numerical equivalent of Princeton University's entire student body driving somewhere in San Diego, parking on the street, and simply never returning. Every month. And this is the contribution of only one mid-sized, not-particularly-remarkable city. I'm tempted to believe that people must rather be falling through manholes or subway grates than so regularly, so... *frivolously*, abandoning their cars.

My car is gone now. Not fixed, no, but gone from the roadside. Still, I remember that it was once one of these, an untold story with a clue left behind. And I know that my decision to leave it there, slumped pitiful in the cold with a broken axle, was anything but frivolous. My experience, in that way, shines the

brighter light of personality over these artifacts. These un-peopled objects. Nuisances, as some might call them.

You know, we're not so different from snails: gobs of flesh encased in protective shells. Only, rather than taking our shells with us, we travel from shell to shell. From house to car, car to office, office to car to favorite restaurant to home. Still, like snails, we, too, outgrow our shells. We crave some change, or our shells wear down or break, and we must move quickly on. Often, there is a palpable sense of loneliness, a despair, that attaches to abandoned artifacts like cars and houses and children's dolls. But we don't feel this when we look at empty shells. We see an object that has served a noble purpose, that was molded from common elements into a form that, miraculously, will never quite be replicated. That was made with a unique and complex intention. We might, then, interpret those things we leave behind not as merely *abandoned*, never to be returned to, but as physical traces of our nonphysical consciousness—as testaments that we, too, were here—spelled by the bumps, dents, holes, and bruises, by the swirls and the ridges and the shadows and the colors that we've left—that we've *printed*—there, upon them.