

Thanksgiving

“Could it possibly get any worse?”, I exclaimed in exasperation.

It had been a horrible day ever since I woke up that morning. I had got dressed to leave for school and stepped out of the house, when I discovered that somebody had stolen my car. The visit to the police station was barely tolerable, but the telephone conversation with the insurance company had tested my patience to its limits. When I finally arrived in my office in school, I almost immediately spilled an entire mug of coffee on my computer’s keyboard. On my way back, just as I mounted my bike, it started raining. And now this – a flat tire in the middle of nowhere!

It was about 8:45pm on the chilly November night. It was the eve of thanksgiving and the campus was deserted. There was complete silence except for the pitter-patter of the rain and the occasional hoot of an owl.

I was taking my usual route back from work, along the bike path dissecting the vast arboretum in the Stanford University campus, when I heard the hiss from my rear tire. The bike started to wobble. I immediately knew from experience that it was a flat tire.

I got off my bike to take a look at the tire. I could clearly make out in the light of my headlamp that the culprit was a long iron nail. “Darn it,” I thought, as I pulled the nail out of the tire and put it in my pocket. “At least nobody else will be a victim of this nail now.”

I reached under my seat to unstrap the repair kit, but it was missing. I remembered with annoyance that I had removed my repair kit from the bike that week and forgotten to put it back.

“Great! I don’t even have any tools or the spare tube now. I have the portable pump strapped to the crossbar, but of what use is it now?” I said to myself.

I resigned myself to walking my bike home. It was a good half hour walk from there and it was not going to be pleasant in this rain.

I had always loved biking through the Stanford arboretum. The oak and eucalyptus trees, lovingly planted by Jane and Leland Stanford themselves, looked grand, if somewhat lonely. The couple had planned to build a new family home in these grounds, but it had become the site of the family mausoleum instead. The dignified presence of the Greek-temple like mausoleum in the middle of the arboretum had always brought forth in my mind images from a century ago.

As I walked my bike past the weeping stone statue called the ‘Angel of Grief’, I could

barely make out the lonely structure of the mausoleum ahead in the flashing white light of my bike's headlamp.

It was at this moment that I saw him. Or rather, saw the light on his bike as he came riding towards me. I did not expect to see anybody at this hour on the otherwise deserted campus. He biked past me, then stopped and turned around.

"Do you need any help?" he asked. He was a young man, with a freckled face that I could make out as being very kindly even in the half-light of my headlamp. He was wearing jeans and a denim jacket. Both the jeans and jacket looked badly soiled. There were several tears in the jeans and the jacket. I was used to seeing students wearing soiled jeans with tears. 'Fashion', they said, though I had never understood it. The sizes of the tears in the jacket were quite unusual, but nothing shocked me anymore.

"Thanks, but I don't think you can really help," I said. "I have a flat."

He set his bike against the wall of the mausoleum and started inspecting the flat tire. "Do you know what caused it?" he asked. I handed him the nail and he let out a low whistle.

"This is bad. It could cause a tear if you put this nail in your pocket. Here, wrap it in this before you put it back in your pocket," he said as

he handed me the nail and a piece of paper he had taken out of his pocket.

He started unstrapping the bag slung under his seat.

“Thanks for your offer of help, but I really don’t think you should be wasting your time. It is late in the night and it’s raining”, I protested.

He laughed. It was a hearty but almost soundless laugh, coming from deep within him. “I am already wet. This won’t take more than a few minutes anyway.”

He quickly set to work on my bike, removing the tube and working his hands around it expertly to find the hole the nail had caused. Within a few minutes, he had stuck a patch to it and reinserted the tube in the tire. I quickly pumped air into it using my portable pump.

Just as we were about to part ways, I remembered that I had not even asked his name until then.

“Liam”, he said, holding out his hand. I remembered from my recent trip to Dublin that *Liam* was Gaelic for *protector*.

“A very apt name,” I said as I gratefully shook his hand. “How could I possibly thank you?”

“Help somebody else in need, when you are able to. That would be the best way to thank me,” he said.

“Take care, Professor”, he said as we mounted our respective bikes. “And ride safely.”

It had stopped raining by this time. I started humming a tune, keeping an eye on the road to ensure that I did not ride over any more nails.

I was crossing the bike bridge across the San Francisquito creek when it struck me suddenly that I had not told him I was a Professor. “How did he know? Was he a student in my school?” I wondered. I did not remember seeing him in the past. Perhaps he had just guessed, though I did not look like the typical Professor.

Shortly, I was in the comforting ambience of my home. I removed my shoes and sank into my favorite chair, switching on the television. The evening news was on. I started opening my mail. The dreaded gas bill was right on top. I had only started cursing the exorbitant gas prices this year when I heard the news presenter say the name.

“...Liam Fitzgerald, was killed this morning while riding his bicycle on Arboretum Road near the Stanford Shopping Center. The police are investigating the case, and think that it was a hit and run accident. No eyewitnesses to the accident have come forward yet and the culprit is unknown for now.”

I looked up at the television screen and froze in horror as I saw the kindly freckled face.

I started absent-mindedly taking things out of my pocket and fidgeting with them even as my attention was glued to the television screen. Suddenly, I noticed that I had the offending nail in my hand, wrapped in the piece of paper Liam had given me. Carefully unwrapping it, I got a second shock when I saw, written in bold letters across the sheet, the letters ‘DMBLDR6’.

“How in the heavens did my car’s license number get onto this sheet of paper?” I finally blurted out aloud.

I looked again at the sheet of paper to be certain that I had not imagined it. I turned it around in my hands and discovered that a name and an address, neither of which I recognized, were written in the same handwriting.

When I regained my composure, I thought carefully about the extraordinary sequence of events that day. Finally, I picked up the phone and dialed. The voice at the other end said officiously, “Palo Alto Police Department. How may I help you?”

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