

## The Car

He watched from a safe distance as she hefted the sledgehammer, arced it over her back and swung it. The sun glinted off the metal head of the new sledge as it reached the top of the swing.

The hammer whistled through the air before crashing down onto the hood of the car. The blow was a good one and the impact lifted her off her feet. Had it been a movie the director would have shot it from different angles and repeated it over and over so its effects would have been fully felt.

She grunted. He couldn't tell if it was a sound of satisfaction or effort.

She raised the tool turned weapon over her head again and smashed it onto the car. The soft metal of the car screeched as though it were human when she struck it.

He studied the expressions on her face as she rained down fury on the helpless vehicle. First he saw surprise, then grim determination and finally her features twisted into a mask of rage.

He jumped when she started to scream. There was nothing coherent about her screams. They were emanating from deep within and were guttural sounds of anger and frustration because she could not put into words what she was feeling.

He wondered if he should stop her, but her shrieks faded, as her voice grew hoarse. At last, her anger-fueled strength was spent and she could no longer lift the hammer over her head. Yet she wasn't ready to stop. She swung the hammer like a croquet mallet against the rusted bumper of the car.

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When they had set out a week ago on a crystal clear October Saturday morning, he didn't imagine he would end up watching her pummel a car. It was harvest time and they'd decided they would take a day trip around the area to soak up some early autumn sun and perhaps buy some items from the farm stands that sprouted up this time of year.

The morning had passed quickly and around noon they were hungry, so they stopped for lunch at a small town that was celebrating with a farmers' fair. As they walked down the narrow and crowded streets of the little burg, a gentle autumn breeze carried the wonderful fragrances of various foods.

She inhaled and said, "Robert, I smell apple butter."

"Donna, I detect the scent of chicken corn soup."

They took turns guessing at the foods by sniffing the aromas wafting through the air and got hungrier by the moment. When they started to drool, they knew it was time to eat. They stopped at a stand and got barbecued chicken and french fries with vinegar, which they washed down with cider and then started on funnel cake. He laughed at the powdered sugar mustache that formed on her upper lip when she bit into the sweet treat.

After eating they wandered around until the reflection of the sun off chrome caught their attention. They walked down the street and came upon a display of antique cars.

They strolled along admiring the autos, which were parked at an angle on both sides of the street. They had reached the end of the display when he felt her hand lock onto his arm and squeeze. He looked at her and saw that she had gone so pale as to be almost translucent and her blue eyes had glazed over.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

“I have to get away from here,” she whispered.

“Why? What is it?”

“Let’s go. Now!”

Because of the urgency in her voice, he didn’t ask any more questions, but instead turned back up the street.

“No, this way,” she said and headed away from the cars and toward the deserted end of the street.

She hurried along and he had to work to keep up with her. She got a couple of blocks away, doubled over and threw up her lunch all over the street.

“My God, Donna, what is it? Food poisoning?”

When she stopped retching, she straightened up and said, “No.”

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not? What’s going on?”

“Get me out of here.”

“Donna…” he began.

She grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him close. He could smell sour odor of vomit on her breath.

“I have to leave,” she said and glared at him, blue eyes now blazing.

“Okay,” he said and led her back to their car.

She was silent the rest of the day and he decided not to push her. In nearly twenty years of marriage, he had never her seen her act so strange.

They were in bed that night, both awake but neither speaking, when she revealed her secret.

“You can’t tell anyone.”

“Tell anyone what?”

“First promise me.”

He decided to humor her. “I promise.”

For a long time she said nothing and he thought she’d fallen asleep.

“He molested me,” she said.

“Who?”

“My father.”

“Jesus, Donna,” he said and rolled toward her.

“No, don’t touch me!” Less harshly, she added, “Please, just let me get this out.”

He lay back and listened.

“He used to call me ‘his girl’ and he would take me on what he called our Sunday drives. He would take me out somewhere and park and then he would…”

Her voice cracked. She stopped, regained control and went on. “He would do things to me. I knew it wasn’t right, but he told me it would be fine as long as we didn’t tell anyone. He said it was between us and it was okay because I was his girl.”

Sniffling she said, “And I didn’t. I didn’t tell anyone. I know I should have, but I couldn’t. I was too ashamed.”

He wanted to tell her it wasn’t her fault and she shouldn’t feel guilty, but she pressed on before he could speak.

“It was different back then. It wasn’t talked about and I didn’t know what to do, so I didn’t talk about it. I didn’t talk about it for so long I buried it. Until today when I saw that car.”

“The car?”

“The Cadillac. We had a 1982 blue Cadillac and that’s what we used for our Sunday drives. When I saw that car today it all came rushing back so hard it made me sick. All those things he did to me, his own child. Why? Why would he do that?”

He answered her question by wrapping his arms around her while she cried.

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A week after the revelation he told her he had something to show her. She was reluctant, still not recovered, but agreed to go with him, though he refused to say where they were going.

When they reached the auto junkyard, she gave him a puzzled look and he said, “Trust me.”

When he pulled the sledgehammer out of the trunk she asked, “What’s that for?”

“You’ll see,” he said and he gestured for her to follow.

They walked through rows and rows of wrecked cars and until they found it. A 1982 blue Cadillac, though the color was faded and paint was flaking off.

“It took some calls, but I found it.”

“This is not funny,” she said in a strained voice.

“It certainly is not. It’s for you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your father is dead and gone. There’s nothing we can do about him, but you can do something about the car.”

“What?”

He gave her the sledgehammer and said, “Hit it.”

“That’s dumb.”

“It’s therapeutic. Go ahead and smack it.”

She tried to give the hammer back to him and once again he said, “Hit it.”

Though she protested, he persisted and she took a swing.

“There,” she said. “Can we go now?”

“Is that all you got? Remember what he did and pound the damn thing.”

She did hit it. Again and again until her arms shook with exhaustion and the only thing she could manage to do was swat at the bumper.

The bumper fell off and clanged onto the ground. She stared at it, slumped against the battered car then slid down onto the dirt. By the time he reached her she was crying. It wasn’t just soft, feminine weeping, but body wracking sobbing that rocked both of them when he put his arms around her and squeezed her as they huddled there on the ground.

He buried his face against her and felt his own hot tears run down his cheeks as spasms tore through her. He didn’t know how long they sat there on the ground in front of the car before she stopped.

She turned to him and he could see her face was blotchy with scarlet patches and her eyes were red. He wiped away her tears.

Lower lip quivering, she said, “God help me, I think I still love him.”