Car Trouble

Colin Allenbrand

Concordia University-Portland

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The day was coming to a close as the sun began to hide quietly behind the distant mountains. We had spent countless hours playing basketball at the park—I suppose I could actually count the hours if I wanted to, but I never saw the need to expend the extra thought. None of us were as good as we thought we were, except James who knew exactly how good he was and proudly admitted he had no right playing the sport. Now returning from the park, our six-man group of all-stars continued to brag about all the shots we made, yet none of us seemed to remember the plethora of shots that never actually made it all the way to the hoop.

James, along with his brothers Jon and Jeremy, lived only a few blocks from the park, making their house a good rendezvous point for A.J., Kelly, and myself to meet up with them. Now that we had exhausted all of our energy running after missed shots all day, we came to the conclusion that it was time to head home. Kelly hopped into the passenger seat while I eased into the driver's seat, trying not to show how sore I was from the long day of exercise. Kelly and I live very close to one another, so we decided to carpool and save some gas. It was a special day for me. I had officially received my driver's license six months before and I now was "legally" allowed to drive my friends around without my parents. And because Kelly was too lazy to even try to get his permit I had no other choice than to show off my amazing driving abilities. And what better way to show off than in a brand new, shiny red Ford Focus? This car was a 2009 version and we lived in the year 2008, so my gullible mind was convinced that it was the equivalent of a future hover car—or whatever cool vehicles they would design within the course of next year.

For a mid-size family sedan, this car had all the bells and whistles. I got a thrill out of showing Kelly every one of the gadgets that filled the dashboard, even the ones that I had no clue what they meant. I would tell him, "It has heated seats, and blind-spot detection..."
systems, and a voice-recognition system, and heated (I felt that he didn't recognize the impressiveness of the heated seats the first time I mentioned them). This car was the Lexus of middle-class life, "Look!" I exclaimed. "The cup holders even have changeable lights in them, so that if you have a bottle of water it can glow blue or red or anything else!"

"What if you don't have a bottle of water?" he asked. "Then aren't the lights kind of poi..."

"I will always have a bottle of water, Kelly."

"Well, you don't right now."

"Do you want to walk home?" I let out an exasperated sigh. Frustrated by the fact that he didn't comprehend how awesome the cup holders were, and that I, in fact, had no bottle of water, I threw the car into reverse and began to back down the slanted driveway. Right about the time I was putting the cup holder incident behind me, my rear bumper was imbedding itself into the taillights of James's car. As the crunching of broken plastic and metal filled the air, I slammed on the brakes. Against my will I forced my eyes to peer into the rearview mirror—which would have been so helpful five seconds earlier—to see a Kia Rio that had definitely seen better days. My heart sank. Thoughts flooded my head: I'm never going to be allowed to drive again. James is going to kill me. Why didn't I bring a stupid water bottle?

Kelly, who has an uncanny ability to not take anything in life seriously, began to giggle. "Oh shoot," he said with a big old smile on his face. I've never wanted to hurt him so bad in all my life. I pulled the car forward in an effort to detach my bumper from the mangled rear of its counterpart; the sound of metal scraping metal was deafening to my woe-struck ears. I stepped out of the car to view the aftermath of what I had done, afraid to direct my eyesight to the back of the vehicle. Fortunately Kelly was not as shy, as he ran around to the back and repeated, "Oh shoot." Never mind what I said before. Now I've never wanted to hurt him so bad in all my life. As I wandered down the driveway, horrified at the pieces of car that lay broken on the ground, Kelly ran, or rather bounced, up to the front door of the house. He was apparently doing his impression of a zero-gravity walk on the moon, which led to him bursting through the front door and making a static sound with his mouth, followed by the phrase, "Houston, we have a problem."

James, Jon, and Jeremy all came outside, accompanied by the astronaut now known as my former best friend. James, having had his license for several years by now and having been involved in many past accidents, seemed fairly unconcerned about the damage done to the back of his car. He preferred to offer his thoughts on how my parents were going to kill me. After assuring me that the damages were really quite minimal and "nothing some duct tape can't fix" we wrapped up the incident for the evening. James pulled his car out of the driveway, allowing me to back out without the opportunity to finish what I had started. Kelly did get a ride home, but was not allowed to use the oh-so important heated seats. James duct taped his taillight back together; now you cannot see that the plastic is even broken, nor can you see if the brake lights come on when the car stops. And as for my parents... well, they allowed me to live to see another day. That may have been a mistake.

Two years into the future of 2010, Jon and I were driving home from baseball practice. Not only was I not commandeering the hover car that was supposed to have been presented by 2009, but I was in the very same, cherry red Ford Focus—and still without a water bottle. Jon and I decided to accompany one another to Concordia University where we would be allowed to continue our baseball professions. Because Concordia's baseball field had been temporarily turned into a library, the team was forced to cross the Columbia River into Washington, where we would practice every day. Our coach was clever enough to schedule practice to begin and end during rush hour traffic; this way he could punish the team on a daily basis when we were inevitably late.

Jon and I alternated turns driving to practice every day; on this particular day it was my turn. Practice had come to a close and the team dispersed from the field in a multitude of vehicles. Driving this route to and from the baseball field in Vancouver had become second nature—routine as it were—to where I often could not remember ever crossing the river and exiting the freeway. The task
became so mundane that I could perform the excursion with my eyes closed, though I never saw fit to actually test this theory. This Thursday evening was unique in that it was James’ birthday. Jon and I were on a voyage to their home where there would hopefully be extravagant decorations, mountains of presents, and a cake the size of Gary Coleman... though not necessarily in the same shape. I prefer to imagine that this is the party that awaited us after a long day of running; I imagine it because we never managed to make it to the party.

“You weren’t that good today,” I commented on Jon’s pitching performance in the day’s practice.

“What are you talking about?” he challenged, as he adjusted his seat, leaning it back slightly. “I was striking everyone out today.”

“Yeah, everyone but me...” I smiled.

“Oh, don’t even start! You got lucky I left a slider hanging over the middle.”

“Lucky?” I interjected. I glanced toward him to argue the difference between luck and pure, undeniable skill. In the brief moment I turned away, traffic came to a sudden halt ahead of us. When my focus turned back to the road ahead I saw a sea of red brake lights sitting completely still before me. I instinctively shuffled my foot from the accelerator to the brake pedal and pressed down firmly in an effort to avoid a collision with the fast approaching vehicle on the horizon. My car may not have been a futuristic hover car but it had the finest brake system I could have ever hoped for. We came to a jolting stop several feet from the white Toyota that had just unknowingly dodged a bullet, or rather a car. “That was close,” I began to apologize. “Sorry about that.” In the act of coming to a sudden stop a few of my textbooks in the backseat spilled over the edge and onto the floor of the car. Jon leaned back to retrieve one or two of them and then sat back up, replying, “No problem. Let’s just get home in one piece.” Irony is cruel that way. Before I could even utter one of my sarcastic responses the sound of screeching tires filled the air, but only for a split second, before the world, as I saw it, exploded.

While I was fortunate enough to look ahead to see the halted traffic in front of me, the Jeep Grand Cherokee following behind me was not as lucky. Distracted by his GPS mounted atop his dashboard, he only saw the stopped Ford Focus about twenty feet away. Despite his efforts to stop time and space to avoid the collision, the Jeep plowed into our undersized vehicle at over 60 miles per hour.

Inside our vehicle time seemed to have jumped ahead three seconds with no prior warning to Jon or myself. One moment we were sitting discussing our fortune of cheating fate, and the next moment fate cheated even better. All I remember is coming to consciousness gripping the steering wheel as though I were trying to save it from falling off the face of the earth. My body was seized and I could not force myself to move. A shower of obliterated glass rained down over my head, as well as on top of Jon. He had returned from grabbing the textbooks without a second to spare; had he still been contorted around the seat he surely would have been paralyzed from the incident. But instead he remained frozen in the same position as I, only without a death grip on the steering wheel. Had we not been standing in the face of death the moment would have been beautiful—almost poetic: the shards of glass glistening against the purple and orange hued clouds of dusk, airbags appearing to seemingly burst from nowhere to contribute to the scenic view of Portland’s downtown skyline above the Willamette River. I should have savored the moment...

My heart was still beating but I was frozen in place, unable to move or speak. My mind was perplexed by what had just taken place, as if I could not manage to put the pieces together. Jon snapped my hypnosis as his faint voice murmured words that I could not make out.

“What?” I replied.

“Are you dead?” This time the words were clear and I realized that I was talking again.

“Yeah, I think so,” I answered, my mind still in a haze. Simultaneously we turned to peer through what used to be the back windshield. There was movement in the Jeep, meaning no fatalities this evening for the news channels to harp about. A car pulled up alongside us to verify that we had not been turned into applesauce (that is how I imagine a human body might look after being
splattered against another object. We confirmed that, all things considered, we were perfectly fine. We gathered the nice couple's information as witnesses and parted ways with them; they continued to their destination and we eased the mangled metal cage with wheels onto the shoulder of the freeway.

The exchange of information with the other driver went without trouble, and when we finished he was able to go on about his evening, his Jeep with hardly a scratch on it. The Ford, on the other hand, was totaled and would need to be towed. Jon and I stood on the side of the road, still in our baseball clothing, until we were picked up and transported away. I called James and wished him happy birthday, informing him that his present from me was his brother still being alive. After trying to trade Jon's life for an iPod or twenty dollars, he finally accepted his gift and thanked me.

Now that the heated seats and color-changing cup holders were no longer in commission, I could relive my hope of one day owning the first hover car in Oregon. However, the insurance company would only offer to pay for another Ford Focus, so I took the heated seats and am living like the king of the middle-class once again.

I have just finished reading “This Boy’s Life.” I can put the rest off until tomorrow. If I try to do too much now I won’t be able to pick anything up the rest of the weekend. That was a good story. This is the closest memoir to my life yet. I could use some donuts and ice cream. It’s late but I know that Tonalli’s is open until one. I get wrapped up in some warmth, and then out to Alberta. When I get there, there is a line that I wait in patiently looking at all the ice cream I could possibly stuff between a donut. When it was my turn the young lady behind the counter asks, “What are you having?”

“I’ll have a donut sandwich,” I say.

“With what kind of donut?”

“The Apple fritter.”

“What kind of ice cream?”

“Vanilla.”

She got to work crafting a delicious treat for me. When she is finished she hands it to me and says, “This is a good one. I have always wanted to eat one with a fritter. Everyone else just uses regular donuts.”

“It’s good,” I say. “Do you want a bite?”

She says “no” politely.

I dig in. It’s so delicious.

When I’m done I head back home and watch Bored to Death. The way I feel. It’s about an undercover detective who solves mysteries. The show is funny. Not demanding. I don’t feel like I have to laugh. It’s the kind of comedy that just keeps you from being bored. The people in this series give up important things, just to not be bored. I can’t remember the last time I gave up my boredom to mystery. It’s not always predictable. I can’t remember the last thing that wasn’t predictable. I could have many mysteries in my life. I want the kind of mystery that can’t be solved with logic or school; it can’t be solved by a beautiful lady or a wad of cash. I can’t remember the last time I had Donuts and watched T.V. I’m living vicariously through sugar and electricity.