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The song skipped.

A crackling beat, a brief tremor in the steering wheel—and Lance Hendricks noticed the gap in the music. He knew every last note of *Classical Trumpet Ballads*, which had been jammed in the cassette player of his '93 Buick since the unfortunate day his mother gave him the tape. Now it was his only option. No radio this far from the city. He thumbed the useless eject button, then stared at the speedometer. The needle was suddenly frozen, pointing straight up and down, like a compass finding north.

“Hey,” Lance said, tapping the dash.

The needle hovered like a slender middle finger, then went slipping off to the right: 65, 75, 85, gone. A blank face of numbers. Like he was going no speed at all. Sitka spruce and Madrones blurred past. Douglas fir, and the flash of a small sign:

ENTERING WILDERNESS AREA

Evergreens and sky vaulted into a new layer of atmosphere and the car's dome light flickered. A wet grumbling in the engine.

Lance turned up the trumpet solo, trying to ignore the sound. He hummed along, forcing himself to smile. The gas pedal went squishy and the Buick jolted so hard it made his teeth click.

“Hey!” Lance said, pointing at the steering wheel. “No. Not happening.”

Not tonight. Not with six hours left to drive.

When the song skipped again, Lance’s mind skipped with it, launching his thoughts over 370 miles of rivers and roads to Bend, Oregon. It was 3:35 P.M. Right now his friends would be at Jonathan’s house, preparing for the party of a lifetime. Piping vodka into a hollow watermelon. Regulating the hot tub. Fastening Post-It notes to the rooms of vacationing family members. *Lance + Miriam*, one note would say. It would be their first overnight in a bedroom together.

He considered the factors that had finally qualified him to share a plus sign with Miriam Seavers on a Post-it note equation. Seven years of dedicated trumpet practice. Four years with a 4.0 GPA. The \$16,500 scholarship to OSU both she and his mother agreed he should take. All this multiplied by two years together, *X* hours spent on the phone, *Y* hours on the sofa in Miriam’s basement. Their rare make-out sessions, like flinching marathons. Under suffocating blankets, the threat of parents’ footsteps, whiplash jerks of the head—

The Buick shuddered. Power steering went gummy.

Miriam!

Attractive and intelligent. Deep somehow. She swore but went to church on Sundays. Her favorite food groups were vegetables

and candy. Gentle with animals and children, yet vicious with inanimate objects. Like the way she banged shut the paper drawer of the school's copy machine. A lean little pivot, then *KA-SHINK!* with her hip. If Lance was being honest, it was primarily The Hip Bump *KA-SHINK!* that had sparked his imaginings of the wild, sexual beast lurking just beneath Miriam's church-girl façade. She was an erotic volcano, just barely holding herself back.

Holding back for going on two years now.

Because there were so many nights, waiting through a three- or four-hour date wanting only to touch her. Then leaving her front porch or basement, unknissed, to walk calmly around the corner then race blindly into the night. To try running off the fire in his blood, down one block, then another, only to go home, collapse onto his bed, hold his pillow over his face, and scream.

But tonight in the bedroom, floodgates would open. Lives would be changed.

The stereo skipped again and Lance hit the power button. Life Radio was no longer playing trumpet, nor *Songs to Lose Your Virginity To*. The only station coming in was NEWS RADIO: PANIC EDITION: *You are in a twenty-five-year-old Buick*, said the DJ in Lance's head. *You are 370 miles from everyone you know and your car has 145,238 miles on it. You will not make it to Bend. You will break down and be barbecued on the side of the road by Uneducated Forest People.*

On either side of him, a parade of roadside evergreens, stiff and straight as soldiers. The occasional odd shape, flickering through the pines.

Meth labs! Bigfoot!

Lance rolled down his window, tasting the wind. He breathed deeply, summoning his mantras, centering himself:

You are valedictorian.

You are the first-chair trumpet player.

You have a full-ride scholarship.

Miriam Seavers is in love with you.

The mantras helped. He was The Lance Hendricks Machine. He solved problems with the application of math and clear goal setting. Around the next curve, a blue sign rotated into view.

EXIT 126: BARING, WASHINGTON.

No rectangular logos. No fast food. Stark white symbols of a tent and a gas pump.

Ghost camping. Ghost gas.

Jonathan would've been whistling "Dueling Banjos."

Lance reached over and touched the black hard case of his Wild Thing trumpet, strapped in beside him like a tiny passenger. Miriam had watched as he buckled in the horn the morning he left for Seattle. Probably a mistake, letting her see that.

I feel like you and the Wild Thing are running away together.

He patted the case.

"Don't worry," he told his trumpet. "We got this."

Lance kept one hand on his trumpet case as he steered the Buick toward the exit ramp. A long, gradual climb. The car slowed, sputtered, and died just shy of a stop sign. Lance unfastened his seatbelt and squinted up at irregular blobs of daylight in the metal. Bullet holes.

This stop sign had been murdered.

Lance put his foot on the brake, shifted to park, and took what his mother would've called a *deep, cleansing breath*. But the Buick wasn't good for deep breathing. Sun-baked upholstery. Stale fries and cigarettes. His father, lingering at the molecular level.

Lance opened the door and climbed out. The air had the familiar nip of wilderness. Tree bark, baking in the sun. The mix of scents and adrenaline conjured his father with uncanny clarity. Over the years, he and his dad had lain on pavement beneath broken-down vehicles in remarkable locations throughout the Northwest. They'd unscrewed hex nuts and replaced fuses in three national wilderness areas, and Lance remembered most of their seven-step engine diagnostics ritual: The Seven Stages of Grief.

Leaning on the Buick, he removed his right shoe.

Lance popped the hood and went to work on the battery terminals first. He whacked them hard with the sole, knocking off corrosion crystals, rotating them around their posts. He pounded the starter next. Then the alternator.

That's it? he'd asked his dad. *You just bang on stuff?*

It's an art form, kid. You'll never be stranded, so long as you got your shoes.

But when Lance climbed back in and turned the key, the engine gagged, then died. Lance pounded the steering wheel. He cursed and climbed outside, then lay on his back. Cold, pebbled pavement. The breeze cut through his sock. Inching beneath the car, Lance tapped the exhaust line with his fingers. *Hot!* He jerked back, scraping his knuckle. Bleeding. He cursed again and whacked the gas tank with the rubber heel of his shoe.

Never, he'd once told his father, *in the history of time and*

mechanical troubleshooting, has it ever worked to bang on a car's gas tank.

But when Lance got back in, the car started.

Dome light blazing, Lance whooped. He punched the sagging fabric ceiling.

“Yes!” he hooted. “Here we go!”

He pressed on the gas and the Buick rolled forward. He would make it, half an hour late with a great story. He could feel Miriam’s arms pulling him close. Taste the creamy perfection of Jonathan’s famous White Russian. The engine popped. Convulsed. The brass treble clef hanging from his rearview mirror rattled, pecking glass. *Tickticktickticktick*. Lance’s hands strangled the wheel. He could only steer away from the highway and down the hill to whatever was there.

At the bottom of the slope, a stand of pines and a small white building.

Lance shifted to neutral and the steering locked up. The dash, a checkerboard of red and orange emergencies. Gravity threw its weight behind the bumper and Lance had to stand, one foot pumping a squishy brake, his whole body draped over the wheel, grunting as he angled the Buick into a jackknife parking job across all three marked spaces in the parking lot.

According to the marquee, he was now at JOE’S PLACE.

LAST GAS FOR 30

MEAT OAF 5.99

BROASTED CHKN 6.5

MARLIGHT PK 7.88
KEYSONE! 6 PK 12 PK
CLD BEER
CLD SUNDAY

In these parts, CLD meant “closed” and “cold.”

Cobwebs stuffed the building’s eaves like cotton candy, and the nearby gas pumps were museum pieces—boxy, with faded red fishbowl tops. The smell of gasoline, like it was being ladled from open barrels. Clearly, he could not leave his trumpet unattended.

Carrying his case, Lance left his car and opened the door to the service station.

A bell clanged overhead. It made an awful sound, like hitting a tuba with a tack hammer. The man behind the counter glared. A black man. Bearded and frosted up top, like he’d come in from a snowstorm and had never run a hand through his hair. Joe, apparently.

“That your car?” Joe said.

“Yeah.”

“Why do you need three spaces?”

“Sorry. It’s dead or something.”

“Or something,” he said. “Dead’s dead.” Joe looked down at a pile of paper tickets on the counter. He turned one over. Tore off little strips.

“Do you know if there’s a mechanic in town?” Lance’s voice was shaking.

“Ain’t nothing in town,” Joe said. “You’ll be needing a tow.”

“Tow,” he said, tasting the word’s weight. Three letters full of lost time. Lance needed a different answer. His *break-glass-in-case-of-emergency* solution. The dreaded red lever: A Phone Call to Mom. His phone’s battery would never last. Not the way she talked. He returned to his car, got his charger, and walked back inside.

The bell clanged.

“Damn it,” Joe said to no one in particular.

“Could I plug in my charger?” Lance asked, holding it up. “Is that okay?”

“Plug in by the nachos.” He pointed to a dusty back corner of the store. A giant nacho cheese pump half blocked a single dust-clotted outlet. Hair-curling heat radiated from the box, and Lance held his phone up to keep the cord from melting into cheddar. The odor was a mix of hot plastic and cumin. It smelled good, which meant he was starving.

“Hey hon,” his mother said. “Almost home?”

“The car’s dead.”

Saying the words made it real.

“Dead? Oh my God, Lance. Where are you?”

“Exit 126, I think. In the Wenatchee Wilderness.”

“Wilderness? Lance. Are you kidding me? Is this really happening?”

Lance licked his finger and touched the top of the cheese box. Spit sizzled, hopping around on the surface.

“This is really happening,” Lance said.

“Are you safe? Where are you?”

“A service station,” Lance said. “Joe’s Place.”

“Joe’s Place. Why don’t you get back in the car. Lock the doors.”

“Mom. It’s the middle of the day. I’m not going to be murdered.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“I need your help, Mom. That’s why I called.”

His voice went half an octave higher. It had done that since he was a toddler. She had to make this right. This was The Party. The solitary glimmer of hope in a year of windowless study sessions. An evening planned with the care of a shuttle launch. Orbits, accounted for. Equipment, secured. Excuses, made and believed. A miraculous alignment of circumstances.

His mother must fix this.

“I’ve got to get to Jonathan’s tonight,” Lance said, bouncing his right leg. He had the crawlies in his calves and it wasn’t even dark yet.

“I swear, Lance. This little trip of yours.” She tsked. Sighed. The sound of gears turning. “Get back in the car. Promise me you’ll get back in the car immediately.”

“I promise.”

“Right now, Lance.”

“I will.”

They hung up. Lance looked out the window at his Buick and didn’t move. He took out his phone and composed and deleted three separate texts to Jonathan and one to Miriam. He couldn’t send the messages:

breakdown, stranded, stuck

Those words could not apply to him. His mom would make this right.

When his phone rang, she opened with her classic line:

“Okay, Lance. I’ve got this figured out.”

Her words soothed. Lance’s shoulders lowered. Breathing resumed.

“I called you a cab. A train leaves from Bellevue in two hours. Take the six forty-five to Eugene, and I’ll have Dave pick you up. You’ll be at the party by eleven, midnight at the latest.”

“I won’t get back until midnight?” Lance asked, a full octave higher now. He did a frantic half pirouette by the nacho machine and knocked his wrist into metal. A hot pinch. Burning hair. He shrieked and dropped his phone. *Crack*. He picked it up: tiny lines, spiderwebbing through his screen. Frozen ripples in a pond. He wiped the phone. Licked his finger. Wiped again, grunting. *Cracks*. *Cracks!* Permanent!

He made a high eeping noise.

“Lance? Lance! What is wrong with you!”

“You made me drop my phone.”

“Lance.”

“My phone’s broken.”

“We’re still talking, Lance.”

“I’m going to miss the party. I can feel it.”

“Calm down. Just stay in the car. You are in the car, right?”

When they hung up, he gripped the phone and felt its edges. Reassuring angles of glass and steel. What if his phone had died? For the first time, he felt incredibly distant from Bend.

He stood very still.

A familiar sensation, beginning with a spontaneous tingle up the back of his neck. Then a swelling in his chest, and he reached

for a napkin. Fished a pen from his pocket. He drew on the soft paper surface, pressing too hard, leaving small gouges, until he had created a blank five-line musical staff. He began to blacken the lines with heads and stems, the first pair of notes in a new composition.

He was humming, scratching out a time signature, still trying to pin the magic to a napkin when the door to Joe's Place blasted open. That bell. The sound was all wrong, knocking him out of the song. A cool breeze swept through the shop. When Lance looked up at the strange man who had come for him, the rest of his notes blew away.