

Kwik Destiny

Wilton pinched the fingertips of his gloved right hand with his left, leaning his wrists on the steering wheel to keep the car steady on the icy road. He pulled the wool glove off and reached down to the dashboard console to adjust the heater and windshield defrost. The Pink Floyd song *San Tropez* scrolled across the display marquee of the car's stereo but Wilton left the volume at its current, barely audible, level. Alice nodded her head rhythmically, not in sync with the warm chords coming from the car's speakers but with the intermittent wedges of orange light that faded in and out through the passenger side window. She began to fiddle with her phone. Wilton could see her face in the peripheral of his vision. The blueness of her phone's screen shining up at her. Her dim lips hovering close together as she flicked through an array of bright notifications. Wilton pulled his glove back on and settled back into the driver's seat. The front tires of the car slipped over the ice, the speedometer winding up to thirty miles-per-hour in error before the treads regained their hold. Wilton turned the wheel once in each direction to compensate and soon the car was square in the rightmost lane between the road stripes on the left and the glassy sidewalk to the right. Some groceries shifted on the back floorboard. Alice scrolled through the newsfeed on her phone, touching the screen with a fingertip, staring blankly at pictures of her ex-boyfriend, leaning against the railing of a Carnival cruise ship somewhere tropical, next to the blonde accounts supervisor with whom he is currently *in a relationship*. She flicked her finger across the screen again.

“Do you mind?” he said. The glare of her phone cast a wide atmospheric streak across the inside of the windshield. Alice exasperated an apology and turned her phone over in her lap before looking down the road in front of them. Ahead and at a distance she saw a bright

something leaning against the concrete barrier that partitioned the sidewalk from the as of yet unfrozen pond below.

“What’s that?” said Alice.

“What’s what?” said Wilton.

“That,” she said again, nodding in the direction of the sidewalk just ahead of them.

“What are you talking about?” Wilton said.

“That pile there,” she said, raising her voice as she turned her palm over to indicate where. The olive drab sleeve of her jacket hanging loosely as she gestured.

“It’s just trash sweetheart,” he said. The distinct aspiration of his words the sound of someone trying hard to enunciate in a way that hid the twang inherited from his childhood in Tennessee. She thought for a second that it could just be a trash heap, smelly white and yellow bags from the dense neighborhoods that lay beyond the pond. She looked again, tucking her hair behind her ears, pulling her face closer to the glass in front of her. Thick needles of ice fell in steady nets on the windshield and were immediately wiped away. Alice scanned the precipitation above them for a clearing that could indicate where the weather led – for better or worse.

Wilton and Alice watched as the mysterious pile became clearer in the haze. It was not a trash heap. Wilton let off the gas bit but kept his foot resting over the pedal as what they thought was a pile of yellow strung bags of trash became narrower and taller and soon the blurry outline of a person became distinguishable against the grey mist surrounding it. As they drove nearer, a burst of wind moved across the street and whistled through the thin weather-stripping of the driver’s side window. The body shifted under the streetlight. A thin arm, sleeved in what looked

like a yellow rain slicker, rose up and pulled the edges of the jacket's hood close together to shield the face underneath from the icy mist.

“Sucks to be them,” Wilton laughed, his eyes already back on the road. His foot already back on the accelerator. As they drove past, Alice turned to follow the stranger on the sidewalk. The person was leaning against the concrete wall. In the dense and orange-lit air, Alice could see the shape of someone small, vaguely feminine with thin, denim covered, legs folded into their chest, head resting against their knees, arms encircled for warmth. Through the sleet, Alice could see that the yellow slicker although grimy still had the sort of bright fluorescence that reminded her of the reflective vest that road workers wore.

“Stop the car,” said Alice.

“No thanks,” he smiled, dropping his right hand from the steering wheel and pinching Alice's thigh affectionately. Alice had shifted her legs away from Wilton and turned to look back at the person hunched over on the sidewalk.

“I've told you about how I got frostbite in college right?” said Wilton. “I was dumb enough to wear those sneakers with the low ankles, the ones with the blue laces. Wore those without socks and skipped class because it was snowing.” He continued, the car creeping along the icy bridge, “A bit of ice got stuck between the ball of my ankle and my shoes.” Wilton kept rambling about frostbite, how the skin on his foot turned gray and flakey, and that even after eight years the feeling on his ankle has not returned, but all Alice could focus on was this person in yellow just past her window. Alice could see their car's brake lights reflecting in the back glass of the car. The icy road limited Wilton's usually speedy motoring. As Wilton touched the brakes, the person's head shot up and their hand reached down, bracing the sidewalk as they

began to stand. The wind billowed in the person's hood, pulling it halfway back over their head to reveal long and straight blonde hair. A young girl, Alice noticed, narrow boned, hipless, no doubt freezing as she tried to stand in the sleet and rain.

“We need to pick her up,” said Alice, shifting in the passenger seat.

“Pick who up?” said Wilton.

“The girl you just passed,” she said. Alice adjusted the lapels of her jacket, cinching them together to cover her throat. The road ahead of them had begun curving around the northern edge of the icy pond, a gradual listing of asphalt and streetlights that straightened back out after passing the Kwik Destiny gas station on the near side of the street – its red and white sign perched luminously atop a pole.

“We’re not picking anyone up. It’s already getting late and I want to get home,” Wilton said, his head jerking in response.

“It’s late for her too. Just turn around and pick her up.”

“Absolutely not.”

“It’s cold out and with the sleet coming down the way it is—“

“I am not – *repeat not* – picking up some hitchhiker,” said Wilton. He reached down to turn-up the volume on the stereo. The song had changed; the word *Echoes* scrolled across the display. Alice immediately reached down with her left hand and wheeled the volume knob to the off position.

“Alice, it’s not safe. You don’t know who these people are.” He worked hard to control the car as they followed the road around the pond, the car twisting with short quick slides

between the lane markers. “There’s usually a reason they are out on their own like that. Don’t be fooled,” said Wilton.

“Not everyone on the street is like that. Show a little compassion,” she demanded.

“Maybe she needs help. I’ve picked up people where all they needed was a lift down the road.”

“When did you pick someone up?” The pitch of Wilton’s voice dropped slightly as he spoke. Her words had surprised him.

“When I lived in California, I was driving along Highway 62 through Yucca and passed this man who was standing on the sidewalk outside an *El Pollo Loco*.” Alice continued, “His car had a busted radiator or something.”

Wilton leaned back in the driver’s seat. He had taken his foot off the accelerator as they approached a set of traffic signals. A blinking red light over the center turn lane hung neatly by two green lights, the three hovered like Christmas lanterns strung above a patio. The bright sign of the gas station loomed over the intersection.

“What were you thinking? Picking up some hitchhiker in the California desert...” Wilton moved his right elbow to rest on the center console. He pinched his nose with his left hand, wiping his fingers on his jeans. He held the steering wheel loosely with his right. “...that seems *really* safe,” he added with a bit of his usual stone-faced sarcasm.

“Some people don’t have to convince themselves to be helpful,” Alice began to pick at her fingernails. “...and it turned out just fine though, thank you,” Alice said.

“Obviously,” replied Wilton.

Alice turned to face Wilton for a moment before shaking her head in annoyance and returning her gaze out the window. Alice continued, “Nice fellow, in fact.”

“Look, we’re not picking her up. It’s late. We have wine. We have a hot chicken.”

“Oh we have wine? Really? And a ten dollar deli chicken? How terrible it is that these conveniences exists,” she smirked, “...a rotisserie chicken. Really? What is the world coming to when we refuse to help strangers because of some *poultry* burden?” Alice raised her hands up, even with her shoulders, palms skyward, her voice a fair facsimile of someone sympathetic. “If only we could write off a single bag of groceries and help a stranger shivering in the cold,” she dug in her pants pocket. “Hold on. I’ve the receipt right here. How much would it actually cost *us*?”

“What do you want me to do? We’ve already passed her and I’m not going to waste groceries.” He gestured with his thumb toward the backseat of the car. “This is the only night we get to relax all week. A little wine. A little dinner,” Wilton said, peering at Alice. His mouth pursed in frustration.

“I’m just saying that if it were me,” Alice said flatly.

“If *what* were you?”

“If I were driving is all...I think that I—“

“But you’re not driving are you? You never drive,” Wilton interrupted.

“*If* I were driving...” Alice lowered her voice and turned back to Wilton. “I think that I would be willing to give up...” peering at the receipt she had pulled from her pocket, “...less that eighteen dollars’ worth of groceries to help someone obviously in need.”

“Maybe they want to be out in the cold? Did you consider that they may enjoy it? I mean, they’ve got legs don’t they?”

“Not they. She,” Alice wadded the receipt, “. . .and you’re probably right. I’m sure that *she* just loves being out here alone in the freezing rain. Who wouldn’t?”

“Who doesn’t love fresh air? Brisk,” Wilton chuckled.

“You’re such an asshole,” Alice turned to look out the window. She rested her elbow against the door’s armrest, her shoulder pressing lightly against the glass. Whatever feelings of compassion she tried to share with Wilton evaporated somewhere between them. She tried, and had tried for months now. She felt suddenly and overwhelmingly exhausted.

“And you know what else?” Wilton raised his voice a little, his breath thick over his tongue. “I really don’t appreciate your shitty passive-aggressive, ‘if-it-were-me’ sort of charity.” He pressed the brake pedal softly with his foot, holding the steering wheel firmly as the car rolled across the ice to a stop under the traffic signal.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware that being charitable is a personality flaw,” she replied.

“Where is this coming from?” said Wilton.

“I’m just saying that I would help someone out,” she said, “You wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t help someone?” His eyes flicked toward Alice, his cheek tensing at what she had said. Wilton could feel his pulse rising.

“I don’t think you’re the helpful type. You don’t care enough about anyone other than yourself.”

“I care about you,” said Wilton. His voice softening as he spoke. Alice did not reply but looked over at Wilton.

“What have you ever done for a stranger?” asked Alice.

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Wilton began to explain how once, while coming into the anteroom of his former apartment building, he had even given a waiting stranger his umbrella. Wilton described to Alice, how the rain outside was steady and seemed to pour from the gutters of the building across the street, how the thunder rumbled somewhere above the city, the tall buildings muting the sound so that the rumble came from everywhere and nowhere. The rain was ankle deep against the curb of the street and flowed into a large drainage opening. He described how he had shuffled in from the downpour when he saw an old woman standing in the entrance. The woman had given him a simple and polite smile. She held a set of keys in one hand and a large white canvas bag over her left shoulder.

“Some weather,” he had said, shaking the rain from the umbrella onto the bare laminate floor of the building. He pulled the umbrella closed and began to hook its strap around his thumb.

“It sure is,” she had said to Wilton, who had begun to pull at the new blue scarf that hung around his neck. Wilton walked toward the woman. His brown shoes, soaked black by the rain above the sole, left dirty hieroglyphs of his footprint as he squeaked across the floor. The woman began to pull the collar of her jacket up, hunching a little so she could bring the back of it over her head.

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Wilton continued, “So then I said ‘here, take my umbrella’ and she looked at me with these gracious old blue eyes and said—“

“Fuck off?” Alice interrupted.

“...she said ‘thanks’,” sighed Wilton.

The bright sign of the Kwik Destiny gas station lit up the intersection where, car idling, Wilton and Alice sat with no more words between them – in silence. Wilton remembered the feeling of doing a good thing for someone in need. He remembered that he was once a compassionate stranger during a rainstorm – dry under an umbrella made of his own kindness.

What Wilton had failed to tell Alice was that the umbrella was not his. It had come to Wilton only moments before he had entered the apartment. A teenage boy with metal pins on his coat had come from the opposite direction as Wilton, and had held the umbrella out over Wilton as they crossed paths to shield him from the growing downpour. The boy grabbed Wilton’s hand and placed it around the umbrella’s yellow plastic handle. “Keep it,” the boy told Wilton, before he continued down the sidewalk, face and neck exposed, laughing to himself in the falling rain, the boy’s grey coat already becoming spotted with wetness. Wilton did not remember saying thank you or expressing any semblance of gratitude but had stood still and watched as the boy trotted off through the rain, disappearing amid the blue and black garb of tall pedestrians at a street-corner.

He glanced over at Alice. She sat silently, her face propped against her fist, arm braced against the window, eyes staring absently in resignation through the wintery mix ahead of them. *Show a little compassion.* Wilton felt the tinge of Alice’s words again as he looked at her. There was a pressure that rose up in his chest. Alice picked at her fingernail with her thumb. He wanted

to reach over and hold her hand, to *show* her that he cared, but knew any affection would fall short. He thought of speaking, of telling her how gorgeous she is to him, how much he admired her in these moments. It was no use, he reasoned. He had been unfair. Wholly and incredibly short and uncaring.

Wilton looked in the rear-view, checked for oncoming traffic to his left, and began to creep through the stop light. The car slowly gained speed against in the icy road. Sleet pelted the windshield. He steered toward the center of the road, where a turn lane opened up so that cars could cross to the opposite side of the road. He eased the car between around the stubby median that divided the street. The front of the car slid out into the lane, the needle on the speedometer whirred to twenty-five miles-per-hour as the wheels spun on the frozen asphalt. The long icy road wrapping around the cold pond to their left. There was the sound of a rapid clicking as the anti-lock brakes slowed the car enough for Wilton to regain control. They were now facing the direction from which they had just come with no other headlights or taillights that they could see.

“What are you doing?” Alice asked.

“Turning around.” Wilton said.