

# WINTER

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Fat, dime-sized snowflakes were sifting down out of a beaten-pewter sky when the Jeep's engine conked, sputtering into silence. I hit the shifter with the heel of my hand, knocking the tranny into neutral, and coasted to a halt, the big winter tires grunching loudly on the coarse gravel shoulder.

*Shit.*

I snagged the Mag-Lite tucked behind my seat and got out and unlatched the hood. It was early afternoon, but the scudding clouds obscured the sun and the dull grey light illuminated without revealing. Swinging the hood up, I just let it clunk against the windshield, not bothering with the prop. I clicked the flashlight on and played it over the engine. Nothing caught my eye as an immediate problem – nothing smoking, on fire, or spurting oil. It just squatted there, a hundred and fifty-one cubic-inch-displacement cast-iron Pontiac 4-cylinder, painted a peeling blue and ticking quietly, radiating heat. I turned the Mag-Lite off, jammed it into my jacket pocket, briefly warmed my hands over the exhaust manifold. Reached up, grabbed the hood and let it drop with a slam – didn't bother with the latches, because I had a feeling I'd be opening it again soon. Climbed back into the driver's seat, stuck the key into the column, and cranked it – the starter yowled like an angry cat before engaging the flywheel. The engine turned over, but didn't catch. I cranked and pumped the throttle until the smell of raw gasoline floated up from under the Jeep. Took my foot off the gas and cranked a couple more times to clear the carburetor, and the starter motor took on that labored, whiny noise that meant the battery was losing juice.

*Shit, shit.*

There was a county map in the glovebox, behind the chicken bar – I took it out and opened it across the steering wheel, poring over it in the feeble winter skyglow. Not a lot of joy there: according to the map I was a finger away from where the black line and the dotted red line crossed. Everything near me was blank. I looked out across rolling fields, rough with soybean stubble. I could see maybe a tenth of a mile before the thickening curtain of snow obscured my vision. Without much expectation, I flipped my phone open – nope, no service. The “A” for analog was lit up, with a single bar’s worth of reception that flickered uncertainly. I punched in my wife’s number, listened to the silence for thirty seconds, flipped it shut.

*Going to have to walk.*

I hopped out of the Jeep and rummaged around in my coat pockets until I came up with a well-used red bandana. Figuring that was close enough to white, I tied it around the door handle. Knowing my luck, if I left it without some kind of mark a sheriff would be along the moment I was out of sight and call the Jeep in as abandoned: one of the few happenstances that could make this sucky afternoon suckier. I looked up and down the empty stretch of tar-and-chip, weighing my options. I knew what lay behind me – fifteen miles of lonely county road – so for lack of a better plan I walked on in the direction I’d been going, east through the long, shallow trough of Briar Valley. Stocking cap and gloves I had – you don’t drive a canvas-topped Jeep all winter without keeping a certain amount of cold-weather gear close at hand. But the breeze, which seemed gentle at first, soon cut through my jeans, plastering snow on the backs of my knees where it melted and began to soak my socks in earnest.

I walked for about forty minutes as afternoon deepened into evening. The snow was coming down harder and I began to believe I'd made a mistake. Ten minutes later I *knew* I'd made a mistake, and had just decided to turn back when I saw a gleam of thin, bluish light across the fields. There was a house huddled under a low, scrubby winter-skeletal shade tree, barely visible through the blowing snow – the gloom had caught the electronic eye of a mercury-vapor yard lamp. Hoping they didn't mind unannounced visitors, I jumped the fence and struck off through the field to the farmhouse.

By the time I reached the house my boots were clogged with mud, my soaking-wet jeans were frozen. Numb from nose to toes, I nonetheless approached with some trepidation, not wanting to top off this cowpat of an evening by getting bit by someone's guard dog. Nothing barked at my approach, so after kicking and scraping the bulk of the mud off my bootsoles I clumped up the tilted, swaybacked steps to the porch and under the glare of the yard lamp knocked politely on the door.

No answer.

There was a light on within, and the shapes of a couple cars in the side yard, so I knocked a little harder.

Still nothing.

I drew back to knock for the third and final time and the door popped open about four inches, held by a burglar chain, and a single rheumy grey eye set in a wedge of suspicious face peered out at me. "The hell you want?"

"Can I use your phone?" I asked, thinking this was not a good start.

"Ain't got a f---ing phone," said the eye's owner – only he didn't say "fucking." Whatever he said, it was *close* to that, but not quite.

“Oh,” I said. “Well, uh, I’m only asking—“

“Get t’ the g-----n point,” said the eye’s owner, only he didn’t say “goddamn.”

I took a breath. “My Jeep broke down a few miles back, that’s all. Sorry to bother you.”

The eye squinted. “Jeep, huh? Figgers.” The door slammed shut, so far as a door can be slammed when it’s only open a handspan.

*So much for that*, I thought and turned to go when the door swung wide open and the owner of the eye tramped out to join me on the porch. He was tall, sickly-looking – waxy pale skin where it wasn’t febrile red. His hawk nose was marred with a web of ruddy capillaries, like a rummy’s but a beak rather than a turnip. His eyes were arresting – the palest grey, with pinpoint pupils like boresights, nestled in the weathered creases of his face. He had lank white hair in a ratty ponytail under a painter’s cap, and was wearing grease-stained overalls and a plaid flannel shirt. His hands were red-knuckled and knobby, all tendons and wriggling veins. A home-rolled cigarette dangled, unlit, from his lip. “Jimrally,” he said, and jangled a set of keys in my face.

“Huh?”

“Jim Raleigh, that’s m’name, crockhead.” He gestured to the overgrown sideyard. “Get in th’ towtruck.”

“Oh, that’s okay, I’ll just—” He didn’t wait for me to finish, but grabbed the shoulder of my jacket and gave me a push. I’m pretty sure he *growled*.

In the sideyard was a vintage Chevrolet wrecker, a bug-eyed, high-hooded, step-sided anachronism, a grease-caked hydraulic arm jutting out of the bed. Sparse stalks of dry grass poked up through the bumpers and when Jim Raleigh yanked open the door it

made an unlubricated squeal of protest. I tugged in vain at the handle on the passenger side for a moment until the weird old bird in the driver's seat opened it from within. It was cold as a tomb in the wrecker, and there was the smell of years of smoke and petroleum. Jim Raleigh fumbled with the keys until he slotted the right one into the ignition, and to my surprise the towtruck roared to life on the first crank. I noticed it was a three on the tree as he grabbed the shifter and wrenched the truck into reverse. His feet, clad in heavy lug-soled rubber boots, danced across the pedals, clutching and revving in an automotive two-step. With a dying-dinosaur groan, we backed out in front of the house, turned, and headed down the farm lane to the road. We trundled past a half a dozen blurred, low, rounded shapes, half-hidden by the snowfall. "Haybales?" I said aloud. I'm a agricultural scientist who works alone in the field: I do tend to talk to myself. Another of my endearing qualities.

"Nope," grunted Jim. "Puttin' cars out t'pasture."

I glanced over to see if he was screwing around with me. "You mean, you run a junkyard?"

He glared. "No I don't mean that, ya charkie. I'm *breedin'* 'em." A twitch of the chin indicated a massive, blocky shape loitering by the fence. "That's m'stud-bull."

I rubbed fog off the window and peered out as we rolled past.

It was a Land Rover, one of the burly fifties-era things, a thoroughly flat spare tire slumped on the hood like a deer carcass. Someone had mowed around it for years, so that the Land Rover sat in a tangled island of multiflora rose and dead jimsonweed. It looked like it had been parked there since it was new. "Uh, okay," I said. This guy looked a little intense, with his pale gunsight eyes, but I hadn't figured him for crazy until

now. Jim Raleigh just curled his lip in an eloquent expression of disdain and gunned it onto the county road, the Chevy's dual straight-pipes gouting out blue clouds of exhaust.

Ten minutes later we reached the Jeep. The weather had gone from crud to crap, and there was an inch of snow stuck to the windward side of the truck. Jim lit his home-roll with a pink plastic Hello Kitty lighter that spat a six-inch flaring butane flame, and in one long inhale sucked down half his cancer stick. His pale eyes met mine for an instant and a grim smile played about the corners of his mouth. "Let's hook 'er up."

I got out and guided as Jim backed the towtruck up to my Jeep, squinting into the wan yellow cone of light given off by a peeling chrome spot mounted on the lifting arm. I stopped him, and he walked over and looped a chain around the front bumper, threw a couple levers and lifted the Jeep with a piercing whine of hydraulics. I opened the driver's door and unlocked the parking brake, made sure the shifter was flopping around in neutral. "Good to go," I said over the grumble of the towtruck, and Jim Raleigh nodded, not looking at me – instead he was gazing intently at the Jeep's grille, as if he could intuit the source of the problem with the power of scrutiny. I waited a polite moment while he stared, and then shrugged and climbed back into the wrecker, and held my hands over the pathetic wisp of warmish air that filtered up from a slot on the dash. After an uncomfortably long time, Jim Raleigh climbed into the cab, put the wrecker into gear, and started to roll.

"Um," I said, "I don't know how far you want to go, but my regular mechanic is in Millheim—"

"Ain't takin' this anywhere but th'shop," snapped my maybe-benefactor. He looked at me sideways. "Think I ain't good enough t'fix yer crappin' Jeep?"

*Jeez, this guy was touchy.* “Not at all, I just – I don’t want to impose any more than I already have.”

Jim Raleigh grunted.

I let a few yards of snow-covered fence crawl by, and said, “I’m not carrying much money.”

Jim Raleigh grunted again.

“So I can’t really pay you right now.”

I was rewarded with a contemptuous snort this time. “Money ain’t worth squart t’me,” he said around the stub of his cigarette. His narrow lips quirked in a grin as he made the turn into the farm lane. “I’ll take payment in a favor, howsabout it?” He bared his teeth in what was perhaps intended as a reassuring smile. “Can’t beat that, nope!” The expression sat poorly on his face.

Visions of *Deliverance* danced in my head. “What kind of favor are we talking here?” There was a tire-iron in the Jeep, as well as the Mag-Lite; and if I had to, I’d fight the crazy old bastard bare-handed if he did anything weird. Anything weirder than *this*, anyway.

He seesawed his hand where it rested on the shifter. “Nothin’ y’wouldn’t do normal-like.” He wrestled the truck into second gear and the wrecker groaned its way through the gloom up to a falling-down barn. The mouldering cadavers of agricultural machinery were scattered around. I recognized a plow and a harrow, but there were other things too hidden by vines and snow to discern. Jim Raleigh took his foot off the clutch and the towtruck’s engine gurgled and died. He glanced at me narrowly. “Y’can get out now, ya crunker.”

I did, and sort of waited for him to do the same. Instead, he sat there in the wrecker and lit another cigarette, the hissing blue column of fire giving his face a demoniac cast through the foggy window glass.

He saw me vacillating and made an irritable shooing gesture. “Go into the scab-motherin’ house already,” he bellowed at me through the thickness of the glass. “Gowon, just mind y’don’t rile Daisy.” When I didn’t move immediately, he shouted “Get the f--k on!” I think ‘furk’ was what he said – maybe ‘ferk’, I couldn’t be sure – but either way his intent was clear. I left the barn and trooped up to the farmhouse; clumped up the steps, scuffed my boots on the mat, and gingerly opened the door. “Hello?” I called, expecting Daisy to be a toothless old bird-dog. Or maybe a vicious Rottweiler: it seemed like that would suit his sense of humor. No one answered. I stepped inside and closed the door, finding myself in a wood-paneled hall, standing on a rag rug, face to face with a framed photograph of someone – presumably Jim, the hawk nose and pale eyes were clearly evident – dressed up like a 1920s motorist, in cap and goggles, posed before a vintage open-topped roadster of some kind. Looked like an early hotrod to my inexperienced eye: bits of engine poked out of the cowling, and the tires were beefier than the skinny bike-tires you usually see on old cars in old photos.

Approaching footsteps snapped me out of my reverie – I whipped my stocking cap off and tried to look presentable, an Herculean task given that my nose was running, I was soaked, and that I had a terminal case of hat-hair. A short, stocky woman in a print dress over a pair of faded jeans bustled around the corner: when she saw me, she went wide-eyed. I felt a blush begin to creep up, and opened my mouth to explain – but her expression was one of wonder, not outrage.

“Why hello!” she said, and came up to take my hand, which she shook vigorously. “Hello, hello! So glad you could make it – terrible weather out there, isn’t it? You poor thing, you’re soaked! Come in and sit by the stove – can I get you something? Tea with cream?”

“Uh, ma’am, I don’t want to be trouble, but Mr. Raleigh told me—“

“Oh, yes I know, isn’t he a dear?” She tugged me down the narrow corridor. I could smell kitchen-smells and the warm scent of woodsmoke. “Now just you shed that coat and hat, and I’ll put them up to dry and fix you a cuppa.” She led me into a cozy sitting room where a woodstove glowed before a pair of well-aged chairs. “Coat. Hat. Sit.” Obediently I shucked my jacket, handed it to her with the hat, and sat. She tutted and left the room. The heat radiating from the stove was bliss – I held my hands out to it, and feeling began to return to my fingers. She was back before I’d even had a chance to consider what to say, thrusting a mug of tea into my hands and settling on the edge of the unoccupied chair. I took a sip. The tea was *perfect*. And it wasn’t just tea.

“Good tea, ma’am. Good bourbon too.”

She smiled, and her whole face crinkled with pleasure. “Just a tiny splash. Is that all right?”

“That’s wonderful,” I told her, and meant it. Took another sip and it warmed me down to my feet. I glanced sidewise at the mystery woman, and tried to decide whether she was a weatherbeaten thirty-five or a well-preserved seventy. “Pardon my asking, but you’re Mrs. Raleigh?”

She laughed delightedly. “I am, I suppose, in a manner of speaking! But please, call me Daisy. That ‘missus’ nonsense is for the old folks.”

I mentally pegged her at forty. “Nice to meet you. I’m Tim Geary.” We shook hands – again, and she seemed to enjoy it as much as the first time – and I sat back down, looked around at the paneled walls, the lamps and photos, and noticed that though it was cluttered with the kinds of memorabilia you expect to see, it was clean as a surgery. Not a speck of dust marred the lamp-chimneys, not a single muddy boot-print was to be seen on the floor. There were fresh flowers in a simple china vase on the end table by my elbow, lilies and daffodils. “You have a really lovely place here, Daisy. Surprised I’ve never noticed it.”

She looked at me, eyebrow raised. “Oh?”

“I work for the county ag department – I’ve looked at the Briar Valley maps about a thousand times and never noticed a house here.”

“Well,” she said with a knowing smile, “we’re not on any maps, so it’s no surprise at all.”

“Really. Doesn’t the, uh...” I bit that back quick – one thing you learn when dealing with the farm folks, you don’t mention the assessor. If these people weren’t on a tax map, *I* wasn’t going to be the one to tattle on them. I grinned like an idiot in an effort to cover my near-blunder. “So, uh, what does—” My inane rambling was interrupted by the shriek of machinery from outside – it was the sound you get when you’re cutting up old dry lumber, and you hit a nail with a framing saw: a scream underlain with a tooth-gritting raspy squeal. It was followed up by a hollow *boom*, the noise of an M-80 going off inside a metal trashcan. At some point I must have jumped to my feet, because the next thing I knew Daisy Raleigh was tugging my arm and saying something soothing.

“Now that’s just Jim out tinkering, don’t you worry – he hasn’t blown anything up in weeks. You sit tight and drink your tea. Would you like me to make you a pan of brownies? I’ll make you some brownies.”

I didn’t think I’d be here long enough for brownies, but I nodded politely. Something must have shown on my face, because Daisy left the room with a mischievous smile that made me deduct another five years from her age. For my part, the warmth of the woodstove was making me sleepy, so I stood up, stretched, and wandered somewhat aimlessly, interested in the pictures and bric-a-brac but trying not to be nosy. Most of it was the kind of thing you expect – postcards from nowhere, faded photographs of strangers dressed in funny clothes. But scattered among them were little treasures of the unexpected variety. There was a bundle of blooming snowdrops in a cobalt-blue Vicks VapoRub jar that I thought was from some greenhouse until I brushed it with my sleeve, and set the flowers tinkling like tiny bells. An intricately-painted coat of arms on a little plaque – the heraldry looked like the kitschy stuff they sell in those magazines, griffins and gears and such, but the execution was remarkable – *vibrant* was the word that leaped to mind. I was examining what I was pretty sure was a real flintlock pistol when Daisy cleared her throat and I jumped guiltily. She grinned and held out a plate upon which was heaped a pyramid of brownies.

“Here you are! Don’t mind any of that old junk, it’s hardly worth the bother.”

I took one gratefully, inhaling the warm steam. “Sorry, I don’t mean to pry. I noticed the glass flowers, though, and had to look closer.”

She laughed delightedly. “Aren’t they nice? Would you believe they grow that way?”

I laughed too, around a mouthful of brownie. “Ma’am, if it meant I could have another one, I’d believe anything you said.” I am no connoisseur of food, believe me – far as I’m concerned, mostly it’s just calories and vitamins. But these... the first bite was garden-variety delicious. The second bite curled my toes. And the third bite brought a feeling like a nap on hazy late-summer afternoon, laden with sleepy comfort and promises of pleasant dreams. I chewed slowly and tried to blink back tears. “My god, these are good. What’s in them?”

Daisy grinned that mischievous grin – and for a split second I figured she’d made Alice B. Toklas brownies as a mostly-harmless prank. But there was not a drop of malice in her mischief. “Just cocoa, flour, butter, sugar, some eggs from the henhouse... and good hospitality, which is the best spice of all, don’t you think?”

I couldn’t talk, between the mouthful and the sniffing, but I nodded agreement. When I finally managed to swallow around the lump in my throat, I opened my mouth to say something – thanks, or cry, or tell her about the best parts of my childhood – but the front door banged open and a second later Jim stomped into the living room.

“Yer crappin’ Jeep’s done.” He shot an arm out and snatched a handful of baked goods from the plate, crammed it into his mouth, and swallowed convulsively, like a shark gulping down a keg of nails. Daisy did not seem unduly disturbed.

I shook myself a little. “Oh, great. Thanks – uh, what was wrong with it?”

Jim Raleigh smirked. “All sorts o’things.” He ticked off a list on remarkably greasy fingers. “You hadda bent packer rod, balkernator was froze the ferk up, needed a new doily on th’ clutchplate. Chiming belt was out o’whack, fixed that. Put in a new

feet gasket t'match the head gasket. Replaced yer cadillac convertor with one that ain't busted." He crossed his arms and grinned down his nose at me. "So yer good to go."

I had no comeback for this recital of gibberish. *Balkernator? Feet gasket? Chiming belt?* I wondered for a moment if I'd misheard him, or was going crazy, or if Jim Raleigh was merely some kind of sadistic scam artist. "Wow, that's... that sounds like a lot. You know, the exhaust is brand-new on that Jeep, I'm amazed that the catalytic convertor has already—"

He cut me off with a gesture. "Don't you worry 'bout it. We'll just settle up and you c'n get on yer way."

This was the part I dreaded. "Uh, Jim – like I said, I don't have a lot of money." I dug my wallet out and opened it. "I've got twenty bucks..." Jim's long, knobby fingers closed over mine and I looked up. He was shaking his head, scowling, and Daisy looked reproachful.

"Don't want money," Jim stated, "so put that cuck away." His scowl softened to a glare. "Favors is fine. C'mon in the office and I'll writecher bill." He brushed past me and, jamming my wallet into my pocket, I followed, feeling like an ass.

The office was a closet-sized nook somewhere near the kitchen – I could smell the aftermath of the brownies, tea, strong soap. Jim collapsed into an elderly swivel chair like his bones had gone to rubber. There was an inkspattered roll-top desk, a smudged and battered CPU case of the inoffensively beige vintage, a monitor with its guts exposed, and what looked like a manual typewriter connected to the works with a piece of wrist-thick corrugated hose. Jim ignored all that and scruffled through the various drawers, pigeonholes, and crannies until he came up with a little faceted glass jar that I

belatedly recognized as an inkwell. Shortly thereafter followed a frayed quill pen and a much-wrinkled piece of paper – from its size, a grocery-store receipt so old the thermal printing had completely faded. Jim slapped the slip down on the desk, smoothed it out with his thumb, jammed the quill in the inkwell, parked the tip of his tongue in the corner of his mouth, and began to write, in crabbed chicken-scratchings. He scribbled and grumbled, hemmed and hawed, and finally made some kind of flourish at the bottom. He snatched up the paper and pressed it into my hand, getting a smear of ink on my sleeve. “There ya go, ya squint! And a better deal you couldn’t ask fer.” I peered at the slip, and realized it said this:

For Work Completed

The Undersigned Will Rem’t.

4 Large Favors

to JRally

So Signed

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“Yer gonna sign on that line,” Jim said, and poked the quill at me. I took it, a little numbly, and noted it was a real feather, chewed at the end and dyed a soft buttery gold.

“So... how large is a large favor? And why four?” I asked, mostly to keep from asking the question that was foremost in my mind, which was *Are you a fucking nutcase or what?* and with a grumble Jim swiped the paper and pen from me, scratched out 4, wrote in 3, and added a ‘&2 Sm. Fv.’ below.

“Happy?” he inquired acidly.

“Sure,” I said, “I’m just wondering what constitutes a large favor, that’s all—”

“Fitherin’ blivets, but yer drivin’ a hard bargain!” exclaimed Jim. He scribbled over the 3, wrote in 2 above it, and running out of room on the slip managed to amend ‘Sm. Fv.’ to read 3 by drawing a leg on the bottom of the 2. “I ain’t goin’ no lower, y’can walk home if you don’t like that!” He glared at me, grey eyes flashing.

I held up my hands in surrender. “No, no, that’s fine – I’ll sign it.” He threw the quill at me with evident bad grace, and I scratched my name on the bottom of the slip. Jim rose and leaned over my shoulder, watching with interest as the point skipped and dragged across the paper, bleeding blotches all over my already poor penmanship.

Suddenly he was all smiles. “That yer true name?”

“You mean is that my real name? Yes, it is,” I said, and when he made a skeptical face I dug my wallet back out, showed him my driver’s license. He read it carefully, lips moving like he was memorizing the information. I tried not to feel dismayed, and told myself that this was the last time I’d drive through Briar Valley.

He grinned and slapped me on the shoulder hard enough to bruise. “Good enough, Timmy boy!” I put the wallet away and bit my tongue – no one had called me Timmy since I was old enough to throw a punch – and followed as Jim led the way back out to the barn. The Jeep was parked there, hood closed and latched and apparently in one piece. “Start ‘er up, the keys’re in it,” he suggested.

I climbed in, wrinkled my nose at the smell of tobacco. *Well, if it really works, and he really doesn’t want money, then I can live with some cigarette smoke,* I thought. Suppressing a sigh, I pumped the gas pedal twice and turned the key, not expecting much.

The Jeep started. I was so surprised I almost stalled it before I got it into neutral. Jim beamed as I gently revved the engine. Something didn't sound right – the normal thuttery, clattery noise of loose valves and worn belts was gone. Instead it had a smooth, rumbly purr: the sound put me in mind of the taste of caramel. I nudged the tranny into neutral, stepped on the parking brake, got out and walked over to Jim.

“Whatcha think?” His eyes gleamed in the dim light like backlit chrome.

“It sounds great,” I admitted. “What'd you do to it?”

He looked annoyed. “Toldja, I put on that new cadillac convertor. Gonna sound like that till she warms up.” He held my gaze until I blinked and looked away.

“Well, thanks. It sounds really good – sounds like a new car.”

He seemed genuinely pleased. “Yer welcome, Timmy. Not often the old man gets to work on a real ferkin' auto-moe-beel.” He cackled, exposing a wide expanse of narrow teeth. “Say, wanna see somethin' neat, before y' go?”

I was still leery of 'favors'. “What's that?”

He leaned forward conspiratorially. “It's m'prizewinnin' car. First one I ever bred that got mass-perduced.” He chuckled at thumb at closed double-door. “Just over there. Let's take a look-see, eh?”

*God, I just want to get out of here.* “Sure,” I said, to be polite – figuring I could make it to the Jeep pretty quickly if it was a body, or a bondage closet, or something even weirder.

Jim Raleigh led the way over to the double doors – the typical kind you see in barns, big sliding slabs of red-painted plywood hanging from tracks. There were at least a half-dozen padlocks and about four yards of heavy chain wound around the handles. I

was beginning to get seriously creeped out when Jim finished unlocking things, turned to me with a big grin, and theatrically threw the doors open. They rumbled apart, revealing within... a car. A truck, actually, I saw as I stepped closer. "That's a Subaru Brat?"

Jim nodded, smiling with paternal pride. "Yeppers. Sire was a '60 Ford pickup, dam was a stray Datsun sedan, mebbe a '66 or '67."

I was too entranced by the car to care about the crazy talk. Under the single weak incandescent lightbulb that hung from a twist of wire, the metal-flake red paint gave back reflections like a bleeding mirror. The chrome brushbar and bumper-guards were polished until they were nothing but gleam. The little truck sat perkily on 28" heavy-tread mud tires with stainless rims: the rollbar sported a constellation of offroad lights. I peeked in the window, and even in the semi-gloom I could see the interior was immaculate black vinyl. It even *smelled* new. "Where in the world did you get this?"

"Right here on th' farm," Jim said with a tenderness in his voice quite at odds with his heretofore gruff demeanor. "I bred th' first Brat in about seventy-one – had me two er three afore one got out, busted the fence an' never looked back. Took till around '76 fer the Japs to pick 'er up and start breedin' 'em wholesale." He stroked the hood lightly. "She's a real beauty, ain't she?"

"It sure is." Jim glanced up, narrow-eyed: "*She*," I added. "She's gorgeous."

"Welp," said Jim abruptly, "show's over. Get the furk outta here, willya?"

"Sure thing," I said. "Thanks for the help and the, ah, generosity." Jim Raleigh pulled a face and waved me off, so I climbed back into the Jeep, cut the headlights on, and pulled out of the barn. The engine had warmed up sitting there idling, and if anything the purr had gotten smoother. The ride was smooth too, I noted, remembering

the way the wrecker had jolted over every pothole and rock in the farm lane. The Jeep just glided right along. As I passed the house, I bopped the horn button with the heel of my hand, intending to offer a friendly honk – but at the brassy squeal that erupted from under the hood I nearly wet myself. It sounded like a wounded and angry Louis Armstrong was bent double under the hood, nursing a grudge. “What the fuck?” I wondered aloud, and half-not-wanting to find out, went up the farm lane to the road and dithered there for a moment. I had an appointment with an Amish family for which I was extremely late. I knew that they’d probably given up on my arrival, between the bad weather and my being ‘English’ and therefore unreliable at best. I also knew that if I showed up there at midnight, soaking wet and freezing to death, they’d take me in, dry me off, and feed me shoofly pie until I couldn’t walk. *I guess I’ll call the bishop tomorrow, apologize like crazy and reschedule,* I decided, and cranked the wheel over, turning left into the driving snow. I really, really wanted to go home.