

### Old Long Since

Aunt Alice glared across the kitchen table at her brother. She wasn't all that sober herself, and this may have helped her hold an unblinking stare.

"I'm not opening another Korbel," she said. "You've had too much." She slammed her plastic tumbler on the table for emphasis, but it wasn't empty, and Fresca and gin splashed on her arm, face and hair. My dad whooped with delight.

"OK," he said, "OK, we need to get going," and he began to stand up, striking his head on the chandelier.

"Low bridge!" yelled Uncle Dollar, and the kitchen exploded in screams of laughter, and I knew we were really leaving. I was ready. All the adults were jabbering incoherently, the Fresca on ice was undrinkable, and hours had passed since Chong, Cheech, and Dick Clark had rung in the new year, New York time. My brother was asleep on the couch, recovering from his outrage over the Top Songs of the Year countdown, and I was stuck in the kitchen with these adults.

At the doorway, Aunt Alice helped my mom with her coat.

She said to my dad, "Stay on the road in this cold. If you go in the ditch tonight, you'll all four be dead by morning."

A light snow was falling, and we spent frigid minutes helping my dad find car keys he'd dropped in the snowbank along the driveway. Someone found the keys, and we piled into the Skylark. The "too cold to snow" rule was failing us. At five above zero, the vinyl seats in the Skylark were like granite, and the nylon shell of my ski jacket crackled like dry paper with any movement of my body. So I sat in the backseat motionless, except for the uncontrolled trembling of my rib cage.

As the car pulled away from the faint lights of the town into the blackness of farm country roads, my parents bickered about the best route home, the car warmed, and I drifted off to sleep. At

some point, I dreamed that I was on a basketball court, running, but a few feet above the hardwood. Gravity's hold on me was tenuous, and I could elevate above the other players without touching down. I rose for a spinning dunk, first 360 degrees, then 720 degrees, and I woke to my mother's screams and a blur of spinning whiteness out all the windows. My dad thrust the steering wheel in one direction and then the other, and I felt the car tilt to the left, as we slid into the ditch.

"I couldn't keep the thing on the road," my dad explained to no one and everyone. He turned to me in the backseat. "Did you remember to check the tires like I said?"

I was still a little groggy, but I nodded, and he seemed satisfied.

We were only halfway in the ditch, on the right side of the road, but facing the wrong way, with the passenger's side wheels still on the shoulder. The snow was coming down in blankets. The rear wheels of the Skylark whirred and spat snowballs as my dad tried forward and reverse over and over.

There were no other lights visible. We were deep in the country. But we heard the rolling crunching of tires on snow, and then a car with no headlights appeared alongside ours and stopped. Inside the cabin of the other car, a match was lit, and a cigarette glowed to life on the lips of an invisible figure. We watched as the lips would inhale, and the cigarette tip would brighten.

The car door opened and the cigarette emerged, trailed by the shadow. My father grabbed a big flashlight and climbed out of the car.

He said to the cigarette / shadow, "You're driving out here tonight with no headlights?"

The shadow said, "How much good did the headlights do you?"

"Can't argue with you there," my dad said. "Think you might be able to give us a little push here?"

"You don't need a push," said the other. He kneeled at the rear tire, and I heard air rushing out through the tire valve.

"Hey!" shouted my dad. "I thought you were here to help us!"

"This is how I'm helping," said shadow, and he moved quickly to open our front passenger door.

"Roger!" my mother cried, and my dad began to scramble in through the driver's side door.

We caught a glimpse of him – gaunt, bearded, in camouflage. But he was gone in an instant, having already extracted the floor mat from under my mother's feet and closed the door as he disappeared back into the snow and darkness. My dad handed me the flashlight.

"Go help the man," he said.

I trudged to the back of the car and shined the flashlight in the man's eyes.

"Need any help?"

"Jesus," he said. "Help me by shutting that damn thing off."

I re-directed the beam to his car. He shoved the floor mat under the rear tire, and my dad pulled the Skylark to the middle of the road.

He stood up and said, "Tell your old man it's fifty bucks."

I said, "Fifty bucks for five minutes' work? What are you, my orthodontist?"

He said, "Tell him it's sixty bucks, and as a bonus, I won't break his tail light."

I shined the flashlight back into his face, and he covered his eyes with one arm.

I said, "How about if I don't tell the cops F86-GLK ran us off the road, and we call it even."

He took step in my direction. He said, "You little piece, I oughta..."

I kept the flashlight on him. "Cops always plenty curious about guys driving around with no headlights."

Back in the car, my mom said, "What a nice man to help us like that. What did he say to you, anything?"

"Yeah," I said. "He said some things. Mostly Happy New Year."