

## **PARK AT YOUR OWN RISK**

It was a typical sunny summer afternoon. I could see the pristine sky high above through the window of the coffee shop as I swung the door open to step out for a stroll with Rudy, my faithful golden retriever. As the doors closed behind us, we ran into the soft afternoon breeze that brought with it the sounds and smells of a perfectly lazy Sunday. Walking down the sidewalk, I perused the store windows. Designer furniture. Best-selling novels. Stylish mannequins. People hobnobbing inside a small coffee shop. And that's where I paused. For in the reflection of the window was the most striking Mustang I had ever seen. I turned around slowly to take in the magnificent machine parked by the sidewalk. It was within touching distance. And it was an absolutely stunning specimen of a Mustang—strong, muscular. As my eyes followed the stripes from the tip of the hood all the way to the rear, for the second time in three minutes, I paused, this time in horror. Before I could completely comprehend what precisely was taking place, the rear of the Mustang was hoisted into the air and off it went, another victim of the ugly tow truck that led the way. For a split second, panic hung in the air. A cyclist stopped, and stared at the Mustang, his face a mask of grief. A bus passing by had at least half a dozen passengers shaking their heads in dismay at the plight of the Mustang. Even Rudy began to protest and bark. Right about then, a young man darted past me as if he were determined to break the world record for the 100-meter dash. He sprinted straight towards the tow truck screaming at the top of his lungs, commanding the driver to leave the Mustang alone. I was rooting for him to catch the tow truck before it turned the corner, as were many others standing around me. And had it not been for the traffic light betraying the tow truck by ordering it to stop, the truck might have even gotten away. From where I stood, in front of the coffee shop, I could see the young man animatedly trying to make his point with the driver of the tow truck. His gestures also suggested that he wasn't making much of an impression. From indignation to resignation, his body language said it all. As the light turned green, the tow truck disappeared and the young man, visibly upset, walked away in the other direction. I blinked, probably for the first time in minutes and decided to not let the incident ruin my day. I patted Rudy and took a step forward when the door of the coffee shop opened and another young man stepped out, his coffee in hand. But what struck me was the look on his face – drained of any color as he stared at the empty spot where the Mustang was parked only minutes before. He looked at me blankly and asked, "Where's my Mustang?"

## RIGHT BEHIND YOU

Friday at last. End of another crazy, rushed, busy week. End of waking up early to beat rush hour and leaving late to avoid it. End of meetings, and meetings before meetings. End of deadlines, and conference calls and updates and downloads. Friday at last. This is what I think of as I sail down I-94, the windows of my Mustang rolled down, my favorite band feeding my ears with their soothing lyrics, the next 20 miles promising to wash away the stress of the past few days. I look up and spot a small airplane gliding through the sky. I look ahead and see a minivan in the passing lane determined not to give way. I look into the rearview mirror and notice a squad car directly behind me. There's a chill that runs down your spine at a time like this whether you've violated any traffic rules or not. So I try to breathe and check my speedometer. I'm fine, five miles below the speed limit, in fact. I try to recall if my tabs are current. They are. I didn't cut anybody off, did I? Not that I can remember. I relax. I'm okay. I've done nothing wrong. I flick the blinker and slide into the next lane to let the cop by. A few seconds pass before I realize that the squad car hasn't gone past me yet. I check the rearview mirror and understand why. He's right there, right behind me, on my tail. I'm not so relaxed anymore. I frantically search my brain for answers. What did I do and where and when? The search comes up empty. I slow down, ease my foot off the pedal, I don't really know why, but I decide it can't hurt given the situation. To my dismay, so does the cop. I flick the blinker once more and move over to the slower lane to my right. My shadow stays with me, faithful as a dog and for the next two miles he stays behind. And just at the point where I was beginning to think everything was just coincidence, I see the dreaded red and blue lights flashing in my rearview mirror. By now, I don't care anymore, I just want to know what I did. I pull over onto the shoulder. I kill the engine and the music. I keep my hands on the wheel where he can see them. In my side view mirror, I can see him stepping out. He's next to my window now, looking down at me. I look up and see myself in his sunglasses. "Your name Frank? Sean Frank?" he asks. I nod. "Yes, sir." A wink of sunlight shines off his aviators. I squint. "You stop at a Shell station by Hanson and Liberty a while ago?" My mind begins to race. What? What is it? What happened? "I did." His face doesn't give away a thing. "Lucky thing the attendant remembered what you were driving." Without a word more, he hands me my wallet and almost immediately starts to walk back to his car. I open the wallet and see my driver's permit and everything else inside just the way it was. As he pulls away, he nods at me and says, "Nice car."

## NOT SO HAPPY BIRTHDAY

It was my brother's 16th birthday. The kid was a gearhead. Thought about cars and racing every waking hour. And dreamed of Mustangs every night. He had what I now think of as the most extensive collection of Mustang posters in all of Kansas City. Breakfast. Lunch. Dinner. It didn't matter. All we'd hear was how he'd build a Mustang from scratch and then drive it through our small town to everyone's envy. And someday, when he had enough money, he'd buy a new one and do the same. No doubt, he was the kind of guy Mustang was made for. My dad encouraged his passion, and did what he could to help the kid achieve his dreams. Took him to racetracks and Mustang events, and the like. And if we had the money, my brother would have gotten his Mustang too. But we didn't. So it was up to him to make that dream come true on his own. But we did our best. So to make his birthday special, my father and I went to a scrap yard in the next town and picked up an old Mustang hood – thought it would be a good starting point for my brother to build his own. The night before his birthday, we placed it against the garage door, outside the house. So far, so good. In the morning, at the breakfast table, my father asked my brother to go to the driveway to see his birthday present. That's when things went wrong. As my brother excitedly left through the front door, my father's friend, who owns a Mustang, entered through the kitchen door. It wasn't long before we heard my brother – shouting, ecstatic. None of us had the heart to step out of the house. We simply looked at each other. My father's friend just stared at us, confused. A few seconds later, my brother ran back into the house, elated that he'd received a Mustang for his birthday. He came straight to my father and gave him a hug. My father didn't move, didn't even smile. His reaction or lack of it calmed my brother down. Slowly, my brother looked up and spotted my father's friend. He knew now what the real story was. Happy birthday.

## FOR ME, FOR YOU

They met again six years later at a common friend's anniversary party. Love at first sight wasn't a myth, at least in their case. And a year after that party, they married. The Howell–Parker wedding, as the local small-town newspaper proudly announced, was the kind of union that brought out the poet in all of us. Kelly and James, estranged high school sweethearts who went their own separate ways after graduation, only to be brought together again six years later. This time, for good. And on their wedding night, after everything was said and done, they made one last vow: your happiness before mine, they whispered to one another. They meant it. It was a year later, the day of their first anniversary. Kelly was pushing her old F-150 as hard as she could. She wanted to get there a little early, and make sure everything was in order. Around the same time, James walked out of his office. Early, by his standards, but there was something he needed to do before he went home. Walking out of the building, he headed right across the street to the jewelry store where he had bought the engagement ring for his wife a little over a year ago. Greeted warmly by the familiar staff, he took out the little order slip and handed it across the counter. The petite woman took the slip and didn't waste any time coming back with a small green box. James took it and opened the box to reveal a beautiful set of emerald earrings. He smiled to himself. Yes, these earrings did cost him, but she would love them and that's all that mattered. He closed the box and slipped it into his pocket. 16 miles away, Kelly took in the shiny body of the car one last time. It was, put simply, a beauty of a beast. Black with chrome accents, the white stripes painted through the center from front to back, a head-turner if there ever was one. Yes, it had cost her, but she knew it would mean everything to him. Now back home, she silently parks the new car in the garage, making sure to get there before he does. She walks into the kitchen only to find him sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee from his favorite mug. Not expecting him to be home, she jumps. "I...I...thought you were still at work, didn't see your car outside." He smiles and walks over, plants a kiss. He takes her hands in his and whispers something into her ear. As he removes his hands, he leaves an earring in hers – one in each. She stares at them in disbelief. She begins cry. "How...how...did you afford these?" He just smiles. "I've decided that from now on, I'm going to walk. I think it's a healthy habit." And she knew right then that he had traded his beloved Mustang, the one he had since high school, for her earrings. She takes his hand and silently leads him to the garage door. He opens the door. What he sees in the middle of the garage takes his breath away. He turns to her. "There's no way we can afford this. How...where did you get the money?" She smiles and looks at the emerald earrings in the palms of her hands. Putting them on, she replies, "I think I'll look much better in these than the ones I had." And almost instantly, he knew the fate of the diamond earrings her mother had given her for their wedding.

## PROMISES

The barn had been there ever since I could remember. Which was all of 17 years at the time, considering I'd lived on that same farm since I'd been born. And as far as I could recall, it had always been empty. So when the man from Minneapolis said he wanted to keep a car there, and he'd pay rent in advance, there wasn't much reason to refuse the offer. No paperwork required. He was a man of his word and expected me to be as well. He paid his rent, 20 years of it, in advance. Odd, yes, but the man insisted. And the next day, as promised, he brought in the car, a spectacular Mustang convertible. He drove it into the barn, draped a cover over it, handed the keys to me, promised to be back every once in a while to drive it around, and hopped into my truck so that I could drop him off at Pillager, where he said he had arranged for someone to drive him back to the city. That was the last time I ever saw him. In fact, for the past 20 years I've asked many people about him. Not many have seen him. Fact is, it's a little hard to find someone when you don't recall his entire name, but the only thing I do recall is that he only mentioned his first name to me, never his last. Edward. That was his name. Or Mr. Edward as all of us on the farm referred to him. And for 20 years I've been taking care of Mr. Edward's Mustang, taking it out for a drive once in a while, changing the oil, just about enough to keep it in working order. I would love to drive it around, but it's not mine. It's Mr. Edward's car and I'm just taking care of it. I gave him my word I would. I even went to the DMV and asked if they could trace the owner of the car. Not legally, they couldn't. But my cousin works there and she said it was in the name of an Edward Parsley who lived in Eden Prairie. I drove down to the address she provided and met the owner of the house. It wasn't Mr. Edward. And he had no idea who Edward Parsley was. That's pretty much where the trail went cold. No one has ever heard of him or from him. He simply vanished into thin air. Pity. I've often wondered what has become of him. I've thought about his car, about why he chose the barn on my farm to keep his car, about where he went, and about why he has never been back to see his car. And lately I've also been wondering about the car. A lot. It's a beautiful car, and anyone would pay handsomely for it. I would love to own it and if it were mine, I would proudly show it off instead of hiding it in the barn. But it isn't mine. Or is it? Maybe. Perhaps. Who knows? I gave him my word that I would not let any harm come to it, that for the next 20 years I would take care of it as if it were my own. I made that promise when he paid me his rent in cash, on this very day, 20 years ago. I have kept my end of the bargain.

## LICENSE TO TEST DRIVE

The first time we did it was on a whim. Driving my father back from our regular Thursday night dinner, we spotted the row of Mustangs in the Ford dealership across the street from the restaurant. I suppose we were both thinking the same thing because when I suggested that we take one for a test-drive, my father agreed almost too quickly. He insisted he wanted to drive and so he did. He was my dad. He made the rules. Didn't matter that I was 35. It was fun. A lot of fun. Top down, radio blasting, we were doing everything we thought Mustang owners did. And then some. But like all good things, our little joy ride came to an end. As we headed back to his car we both wore a smile and chatted about the Mustang and how exciting it would be to own one. My father gave me that look that said where in the world would he get money to pay for that kind of car? My father was 70, ailing, a widower, a veteran. There wasn't a lot he looked forward to. There wasn't a lot going for him in his life. But the test-drive certainly made him smile. That's why, as we passed another Ford dealership a few blocks down from the first one, I suggested we go in and do it all over again. And we did. Same thing. Same feeling. It had been a while since I'd seen him enjoy himself so much. As I dropped him off that night, and he waved goodbye, his smile was different, a little wider than usual, I think. The next Thursday, after our dinner, I didn't ask him, I just drove him to a Ford dealership and we got into a Mustang for a testdrive. We did it again the next week and the week after. In fact, from then on, that's what we did every Thursday evening. Dinner at Toby's, his favorite restaurant since 1968, followed with a test drive, and then, home. Four months after the first time we test-drove a Mustang was the last time my father would ever test-drive one. There wasn't anything particularly different about that Thursday evening. We had dinner. Then we decided to go to the same Ford dealership where our entire adventure had begun. We drove into the dealership and went inside. After the customary chat, the salesman handed us the keys, and we were off. That evening, I remember, we drove around a little longer than usual. And as I looked over at him behind the wheel of the Mustang, I could see that he never wanted the drive to end. I suggested that we turn back and return the car. Very reluctantly he began our journey back to the dealership. We rolled back into the dealer lot and he stopped the Mustang in front of the salesman who was waiting for us. Stepping out, my father held out the keys. "Keep it, it's yours," the salesman responded. My father looked at the keys in his hand. Then he turned and looked at me. But I was already back inside the Mustang, waiting for him.

## 15 MILES

There's nothing more depressing than low light. Unless, like me, you work all night in a small factory with low light. That's definitely more depressing. Definitely. It's about two in the morning now and I have about three more hours of drudgery left to deal with. I've heard that this kind of monotonous labor can make a man slow, as in, kill his brain cells and whatnot. I don't know if that's true, but if Einstein here standing next to me is any indication of things to come, then I'm done for. He's been doing this for 11 years now, and he's the slowest, clumsiest, dullest, 6 foot 4, 250-lb, specimen of the human species I've ever met. I call him Einstein. Everyone else calls him Ted. Ted's grinning at me right now as he sorts the bolts in front of him with his stubby little fingers. He's good at it too. Doesn't even need to look down at what he's doing. I've always wondered why a man as big as him has tiny little stumps for fingers. It doesn't make sense. Maybe that's why he's good at sorting bolts, because of those bonsai fingers. I don't smile back at him. I know. It's rude. He's just trying to be nice. But I'm depressed. The low light is making me more miserable by the minute. Even the hum of the air conditioner is getting to me. I'm sweating too. That's another thing I hate here. It's hot. All the time. I know I said there's an air conditioner, but just like everything else in this oversized prison cell, it doesn't work. So now I'm hot and sweaty and depressed. Can it get any worse? Stop. Forget I asked that. I don't want to know. You work in a place like this two years straight and you know not to ask questions like that. See what I mean? This place is spooky, does things to your head. I sometimes listen to myself thinking, and I think I'm borderline crazy, like Big Joe over there across from me. And then I think I should get away from here. Just take off my gloves, not say a word to anyone, slip out of the door, climb into my Mustang, drive like a bat out of hell for the next 15 miles straight home and start over. I should do that. I can get another job somewhere. Sure, I can do something else that's not going to kill my brain cells like it killed Einstein's. Am I listening to myself? I don't know. But right now I'm not inside anymore. If I were, I wouldn't be able to see the road in front of me. Yup, the road is for real. I'm in my Mustang now. Love that growl. Fifteen miles of freedom just ahead of me. There's nothing more energizing than the low light of the early-morning sky. Unless, like me, you're in your Mustang, racing towards the rising sun. Am I listening to myself? I guess so.

## **PAY PER VIEW**

I parked my Mustang outside Planters just like I do every day at noon. It's a small place that serves sandwiches and coffee and I've been coming here for lunch for years. It's usually not too crowded and I like to watch the news as I enjoy my lunch – soup and sandwich. Simple place for a simple man, you could say. Juan greets me from across the counter and shouts my order to the kitchen behind him. He knows what I like. I sit down as Danny, one of the waiters, slips a coffee in front of me. Sipping the Cuban espresso, I concentrate on the TV ahead. The news isn't good. Never is nowadays. More about Iraq, the housing crisis, a sagging economy and on and on. I look away, take in my Mustang parked across the street. At least there are some things to be happy about, I muse. I take in the crowd around me. Mostly regulars. I look through the newspaper. Kill time. More bad news. An excited reporter's voice makes me turn my attention to the TV set again. High-speed chase. Live feed. Is there no good news anywhere? Anyway, I watch. It's a stolen Mustang. Same color and stripes as my car too. Okay, this might be worth it, after all. The reporter in the helicopter is trying to give us the facts. Chase started about 10 minutes ago from downtown, near Sixth and Torrance. Hey, that's close to me. I'm on Fifth and Torrance. The cops chasing it keep a safe distance as the Mustang weaves in and out of traffic. It looks like it's going pretty fast. I follow it as it takes an on ramp, hits the freeway and then as the driver floors the pedal, it rockets away from the cops. Sooner or later they'll get him, I think to myself. Till they do, that guy is going to have the time of his life in that machine. The camera zooms closer and I get a better look at the car. That's a beauty, just like my own Mustang. And hey, it even has that Raiders sticker I have on the rear window. Wait a minute. Same color, same stripes, same sticker? This is too close for comfort. I look out the window where I had parked my Mustang. Danny, the waiter brings my order. I ask him to take it away. I just lost my appetite.