

The Rescue

Falling snow had already coated the windshield, and the late afternoon light coming through the glass made everything in the car a shade of gray. Reaching over to buckle my 4 year old daughter's seatbelt I looked out the passenger window, and through the drifting flakes I could see the cult members lining the hill above the driveway, arms crossed, staring down disapprovingly at me.

"You shouldn't do this," called Alan. "She belongs here with us."

I shook my head but didn't try to answer. I had already been through too many hours of hearing about how the Lord wanted my daughter to stay there "with her brothers and sisters, where she belongs." When I had proven resistant to that argument, Alan, who was short, thick and bearded like a garden gnome, had finally stood up and said, "Look around you. We're not going to let you do this, okay? Really, there are a lot more of us than you, and we're not going to let you take her." He'd said it evenly and matter of factly, as if I should just be reasonable and agree.

I'd stood up then also, scooping my daughter into my arms, saying to her, and to everyone else in the room, "Time to go, sweetheart. Let's say goodbye now and go get in the car."

When I opened the door into the January cold I'd been surprised to see how much snow had already fallen. Alan and the rest of the group followed me outside and immediately moved around in front of me, making a line across the top of the driveway, blocking my path. There were six men and four women, standing shoulder to shoulder so closely I would only be able to pass through by physically pushing them apart. I found myself coldly evaluating just how I would do that, aware of a ferocity in myself I had not known, but now realized had always been there.

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After a few excruciating moments of standing, eyeing each other, our breath making clouds in the thin mountain air, my ex-wife finally turned toward Alan and the others and said something too softly for me to hear. They began moving aside, opening a path down the driveway to the river road, following us with their eyes as we silently passed through them. At the bottom of the driveway we'd gotten into the blue rental car, parked where I had left it, now covered with snow.

Looking away now from the group that had assembled on the hill above me, I started the engine, concentrating on getting out of there as quickly as I could. After the wipers dusted off the windshield I pointed the car up the steep incline to where the river road joined the highway as it ran through the little town. The snow was coming down harder now, so many flakes falling in front of me that I could barely see through them to the top. As we started up the steep section of the road the tires began slipping and whining, and the car edged sideways, losing its forward momentum. I stopped, and once again tried lightly pressing on the accelerator to ease the car forward. Again the wheels lost traction. Each time I tried to move the car up the road and get away from there, the tires slipped and whined and the car stayed where it was.

The line of men and women with crossed arms looked silently down on me from the hill above the road. As Alan shook his head slowly from side to side I felt a wave of doubt starting to overcome me. In the soundtrack of my mind I could hear a biblical voice intoning something that sounded like "Lo, he was powerless against the will of the Lord." I had to stop and think for a moment, steadying myself against this primitive urge to understand the weather as the will of the Deity. I was far from immune to such ideas. It was that kind of magical thinking that had led to my getting involved with these people in the first place. But now, here in the mountains, with darkness beginning to fall and the

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temperature dropping, I realized I would have no choice but to take my daughter by the hand and trudge in defeat back up the driveway to the unwanted shelter of their commune.

Just then, headlights appeared behind me on the river road. Through the curtain of falling snow a battered blue pickup truck came along, slowed, and stopped behind my car. The headlights were in my eyes as the driver got out and came towards me.

“Doc? Is that you? What are *you* doing here? I can't believe this!”

I could make out that he was dark and slight, his long black hair in a pony tail with a thin mustache and short goatee. I smiled at him tentatively.

“Don't you remember me, Doc?” he said. “It's Lee. Lee Williams. Remember Eugene? The free clinic? You know me, Doc. Hell, you pretty much saved my life. I never really had a chance to thank you after I finally got out of that hospital.”

Now I remembered him. It had been a few years before, during a time when I had been the doctor for a free clinic up in Oregon. He'd been a skinny young runaway, sick and scared with a cough and fever that turned out to be pneumonia. He had no money and nowhere to stay, so I'd given him antibiotics from the free clinic drug closet and let him sleep on the clinic's back porch in an old sleeping bag. The next day, when I had checked on him, I'd found him feverish and half delirious, and I'd taken him over to the hospital in my car. I remembered having to talk the attending doc on call into admitting him. That had been the last I'd seen of him until this moment, three years later, in the gloom of a snowy evening in the mountains of New Mexico.

“It's crazy running into you here, Doc,” Lee was saying. “What are you doing out here anyway?”

“Actually, I live in California,” I answered, struggling with how surreal it felt to be catching up on old times as the snow fell and the group above the driveway glowered

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down at us. I didn't think Lee had noticed them yet. "My daughter's in the car. She was here visiting her mother." I gestured up to the top of the driveway. "Right now we're just trying to get down to Albuquerque so we can fly back home."

Lee glanced up now through the gathering darkness at the line of people on the hill, who stared back down at him.

"She was visiting up there?" he asked. I nodded, and he shook his head slowly. He started to say more, then seemed to think better of it.

"Doc, if you want to get to Albuquerque it looks like first you're gonna need some help getting up this hill". I nodded. Lee motioned toward his old truck. "Well, I just put those studded snows on my pickup yesterday when I was down in Santa Fe. If you'd like, I can try giving you a push up to the main road. They've probably had the plow go through up there by now."

I felt my heart leap at the thought of getting out of there after all. "Can you? That would be great, Lee. I'd *really* like to get going before we're snowed in here. And hey," I added as he turned away toward his truck, "I'm glad to see you're feeling better. You look good."

"Yeah, a lot better than the last time you saw me." He laughed. "This is great, Doc. Now I get a chance to help *you*."

We shared an awkward embrace for a moment before we got back into our vehicles. Lee inched his truck forward until it made gentle contact, and in another moment he began pushing us slowly up the road. I caught a glimpse of Alan, my ex-wife, and the rest of them up on the hill turning away and walking back to the house through the falling snow.

At the top of the road I turned onto the freshly plowed highway under my own power and waved my thanks out the window to Lee as I accelerated down the open road.

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My daughter started clapping her hands.

“We’re on our way home now,” she applauded.

“Yes we are,” I answered as I drove through the blowing snow, gripping the wheel as tightly as I could, feeling an internal snow storm blowing inside me.

Moments earlier, I had pushed aside as magical thinking the notion of finding spiritual significance in being trapped at the commune by the snow. But then a true apparition by the name of Lee Williams had showed up as the gentle ghost of a kindness I’d once performed, and magically rescued me as I had rescued him. I could not push aside the symmetry of that relationship as I had pushed aside the coincidence of the weather. I knew the rescue that had taken place on that road could never be understood as a mere coincidence. As we flew along through the darkness, the headlights illuminating snowflakes that flashed by like stars moving through space, I pondered this. Forty years later I am still pondering it.