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My People

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Gibbon: My People

**MY
PEOPLE**

**STEVE
GIBBON**

My wife says that, when my car breaks down, we are not getting a new one. She hates my car. It is a 1982 Lincoln Continental. It is older than my two grandchildren and dark red with silver trim. Driving is one thing I am not too old to do. I know some people at the DMV, and they know better than to try and stop me from driving. I tell my wife that she will break down before my car. I tell her that my car will last until she is dust. This sets her off. She is not too old to throw pots across the living room. This time, a little porcelain owl is broken on accident. It is a small, ugly white owl, but our son made it for her before he moved away and stopped talking to us. She says that it is my fault that he does not talk to us. When the owl breaks and the pieces scatter across the linoleum tiles, she looks at me with this old, round face and wide, open mouth the same as she looked when our son first asked us to stop calling him. When he said that he wanted us to please leave our grandchildren to him and his wife and stay out of it. It was an ugly porcelain thing anyway. I know some people at the park, so I decide to get in my car and drive there.

I drive in my Continental with the windows rolled up and the air conditioning on and listen to talk radio. They talk so fast on the radio, and I can't listen to everything they are all saying at once. When they start to talk about politics, I switch it off. Politics are the worst thing in the world, I think. Whoever

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Put me in a car with some people in politics, and I wouldn't mind if they were hanged. Or at least tied up and dragged behind a car and then told to go and find a real job like the rest of us. I worked in a restaurant for fifty-seven years. I am thinking about the smell of garlic and the feel of warm, soft dough in my fingers. I am thinking about what my grandchildren look like when I hear a loud crash and am jerked forward in my seat and my head bounces back and forth on my shoulders. I look behind me and see a man climb out of his car with hair like a matador. He has his shirt open at the top, and a thick black tangle of matted fur emerges from the opening, wet with sweat. He is like a swampy wolfman with a mop for a wig, and he is walking towards my car door.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. "I am fine."

He shakes his head and looks back at his car, a trashy plastic-looking new-age thing which has merged into the back of my own. "What were you doing, buddy?"

"Excuse me?"

"You—you can't just stop in the middle of the road like that, pal." The greasy wolfman slicks his hair back with his own perspiration as he shouts at me. I have half a mind to reach for my golf club and teach this man something about respect. "Somebody could have been killed," he says. "I could have had my daughter in the car."

I am about to tell him that I didn't stop my car in the middle of the road. I am about to tell him that he had better watch his tone when he speaks to me because there is plenty of space in my trunk and I know lots of people. But really, I did stop in the middle of the road. I don't know how I know all of a sudden, but it comes back to me in a picture of red and silver, and I can see myself stop in the middle of the road and begin to think about my restaurant, about the garlic bread and the warm steam that used to make my wife glow in the kitchen lights. I tell the man that I am sorry. I tell him that I know some people who can fix

up his car for free, and he is mostly a forgiving wolfman and he tells me more about his daughter who is seven and takes lessons to play the flute. My son played the clarinet and was no good at it. I used to tell him to go outside with that noise, and he would glare at me and go outside and play to the frogs in our pond until his mother brought him in for the night.

I say to the man that I am glad his daughter was not in the car, and he nods and we get it all sorted out. I look at the back of my Continental, and there is some blue paint and a small dent, but it is a real car and all the damage was the wolfman's. I will get it taken care of, but there is still the park.

Jeffrey is playing chess at his regular table. He is an old black man with white hair and giant wrinkled fingers, and the man he is playing is new and losing. I don't like chess, but I do like sitting with Jeffrey, who is a great deal like myself. Jeffrey knows people and knows chess. He understands what my wife cannot bring herself to understand: the only way to get by is to have connections. The world is too big for one person—it will swallow you up unless you have your feelers out and can cling to every corner of the earth. My wife says the only connection she wants is our boy. She won't listen when I say that he's not coming back, but if we get enough people to hold us down we can make it by. Jeffrey knows this. Jeffrey's son, Martin, took a piece of shrapnel in the throat overseas when some suicidal whack job drove a bomb into the side of Martin's squad. Jeffrey was in the military himself once and has some kind of medal for it, and, best of all, he knows people in it.

I was swallowed up for a while after my son first left, and it won't happen again, I can tell you. I spent six months sitting in a hot room on a faded couch, listening to the fireplace crackle, and staring at the snowflakes powdering the windowsill as the sun rose and fell, and the room lit up in different shades of gray and blue. My head was stapled to the cushion. Empty, square bottles stuck to the wooden floor by my feet in clusters. Days

and weeks passed where I could not remember waking or sleeping or eating. The people who I knew slipped through the cracks in my skull and pooled beneath the couch. Never again, I said to my wife. I won't forget my people.

"Tommy-Boy," Jeffrey says to me. He leans back and pats me on the shoulder as I walk up to him. He is the only one who can call me that without me getting upset about it. I tried to say something once, and he waved it off and my blood stayed cool. I don't see how it happened, but it happened; that's the thing about Jeffrey.

"The owl got broken," I say. "My wife broke the owl." What I had meant to say was "the weather is fine," and I soak the warm air into my skin and squint at the sun.

"Uh oh," he says, and he looks down at the chess board. "She'll come around. Have a seat; I'm just about to beat Mr. Finley here at a game of chess."

"We'll see about that," Mr. Finley says, and I like him already. He knows he is going to lose, but he is a good sport and doesn't back down.

"Heard from the boy?" Jeffrey asks. Jeffrey is so sharp that sometimes I don't believe it.

"No," I say. "Not yet." Mr. Finley's bald head is damp, and he wipes his face with his sleeve in between moves. He is wearing a tie and a button-up shirt that is nice but a bit out of place for the park. It smells faintly of hot dogs, and I look around for a stand because I'm hungry all of a sudden.

I used to take my son to this park when he was just a kid. We threw a baseball back and forth on the grass. "Keep your eye on it," I said to him. "Don't jump out of the way like that." I hit him in the cheek once and that was that. He threw a fit, and so I maybe lost my cool and said some things which he misunderstood. I called him a Girl Scout and told him we could go to the store and buy him a dress if it made him feel more comfortable. It was all a misunderstanding. He never played any sports after that. It was like all of his love for baseball swelled up in his

cheek, and, once the bruise was gone completely, so was the love. The stitches spelled out a curse on his skin, and then he went to art school. The baseball flew back in my own face all the time. It flew into everyone's faces. It hit his mother in the face when he came home to her and said that his father hated him. Try telling your wife that it was a misunderstanding. Try taking your son to ice-cream later and saying, "Son, it was all a misunderstanding." Kids don't believe in misunderstandings. They don't believe in metaphors either. Try to tell your son with mint chocolate-chip on his face, "You see, I don't care about baseball. I don't care if you never play sports as long as you live. But you will take a lot of baseballs to the face in life. You will get hit in the cheek time and time again, and if you quit the whole game after one bruise then you will never win at anything."

It was something like that. It sounded good when it came out, and it fluttered across my son's oversized head like a cluster of furious moths, and I could tell that he was giving this some thought for about two seconds until the cluster broke apart and drifted away, and only one or two of the moths remained, tiny pieces of the message still trying to find a way to understanding. The pieces that he retained involved getting baseballs in the face all the time, and he groaned into his ice cream. What could I do? So he went to art school and met some skeletal tramp with a nose ring, and they eloped when he was just nineteen. Good for him, I said. Good for my boy; he found the love of his life so young. He found a snotty little painter with chopped-up, rainbow-colored hair who talks on her cellular phone at the dinner table. I can still hear it vibrating against her skinny thigh during our prayers. The vein in my head throbs in sync with the phone beneath the table.

"Tommy-Boy here's just about to drive us to dinner," Jeffrey says. "His treat." I look over to Mr. Finley who is holding his own king between his fingers and smiling at me. The game didn't take long to finish. Or maybe it did. I don't really know; I sort of

"Sure thing," I say. I don't mind that one bit. That's just how Jeffrey is. Next week he'll come up with a two-hundred dollar pair of earrings that he insists I give to my wife. "Don't tell her they're from me," he will say. "Surprise her." I won't tell him that I know they were his own wife's and that he doesn't know what to do with them now. He doesn't have any daughters, and he never spoke to his sister after she stole a stash of six-hundred dollars from his copy of *Paradise Lost* and moved in with her heroin-dealing boyfriend, thirty, maybe forty years ago. So I will take these things home and give them to my wife and her eyes will shine for half a day like she's forgotten all about our son. Jeffrey knows a thing or two about how to rise above. He rises above every day with a game of chess and a good meal. I have my people and my car. My wife has nothing, but those earrings sure help. I will buy dinner for Mr. Finley, and he will also be one of my people. Perhaps we will meet at the park tomorrow, and Mr. Finley will come again and introduce his wife and his children. Mr. Finley will say, "This is my good friend. He bought me dinner and was a gentleman, but his son will not speak to him. He cannot even see his own grandchildren." His wife will take my hand between hers and hold it just a little bit longer than normal to let me know that she is so sorry. Their son will look to me with an approving nod and think to himself, "There is no reason that this fine old man couldn't be my grandfather."

Jeffrey asks if I am all right in the car. I say I am fine and ask why. He says I was at the stop sign for a long time. I was thinking. How can anyone think straight while they drive around? I need to be still for a minute so I can gather my thoughts together, or they will tumble behind the car in the smoke of the exhaust and that's it. They are gone after that. At this age, you can't waste anything.

He says my boy will call sooner or later. I do not have later. Mr. Finley adjusts the seatbelt strap in the back seat and clears

his throat. A woman in jogging shorts pushes a stroller down the sidewalk at a half-run beneath the shade from the park's sycamore trees. It has all come and gone, I think. It has all come and gone, and where was I when it happened?

I eat a crabmeat roll in a diner that smells like my house. This is the first time it occurs to me that my house might smell old, like this place smells, with mold on the ceilings and moisture in the walls. Today has been a very stressful day. I have had a lot of thoughts like this, and after a little bit I am beginning to want some time away from my people. The food is good, and I tip the waitress fair: a fat, young girl with red cheeks and a smile with straight white teeth. The teeth on this kid, I say to Jeffrey, and he gives me a wink that I am unable to translate because I am secretly wondering if my grandchildren would be about her age. I drive Jeffrey and Mr. Finley home later, and, when I get to my driveway, I push the button on my sun visor and pull into the open garage. That is the best part of my day every time I do it.

It smells like old people. I make a mental note: get some spicy, new-smelling stuff. Stuff that young people will like. Sweaty leather and oil paint. Those are the only two scents that I can think of when I think of young people.

The kitchen has been restored to its normal state. All of the owl pieces have been swept up and I think probably placed into an old jewelry box for when she gets into the mood for arts and crafts and has some super glue. I hope. But no. I pull the closet with the trash bin open and see the twinkle of white porcelain under the kitchen lights, nestled in some vegetable peelings and an empty milk carton, and my heart climbs down into the bottom of my stomach. I reach into the trash and pull as many of the pieces out as I can, but I do not want my wife to see. It is not a project for right now, and the owl will have to wait until I have some time and some super glue.

My wife is watching the 6 o'clock news. A young boy has been found dead, washed up on the side of a river after he tried to swim at an old, defunct lumber mill transformed into a

to a safe facility. They show his face from before he had drowned but not after.

"There is leftover roast in the refrigerator," my wife says to me. "I had dinner with Jeffrey," I say. Her face does not change when the news shows a body wrapped up in blue being lifted into an ambulance.

"How is Jeffrey doing?"

"He is as sharp as ever," I say. The boy's mother is shown crying on the television. There are only a few feet of carpeting between me and my wife, but I might as well be on a space shuttle drifting through a black void, staring down through the little, round window at this planet for something familiar. I wonder who this woman is on my couch, wearing a faded blouse with white and tan peacock feathers and big expensive earrings, who can just throw these owls in the garbage, just like that, like they're finished. I can't think straight with that television blaring.

I sit down next to this woman whose face I have seen every day for fifty-five years but cannot recognize. She is motionless, there, on the center cushion with her back upright and stiff. I reach into my pocket and feel the sharp edges of broken porcelain and hold them out to her, and I feel my heart beating like a man who is watching another man touch his wife's arm in a way that is too familiar. I want to say something about our grandchildren—I want to break through this distance and make her understand that this, too, will pass if we can only rise above it, but what is there for an old man to say to his old wife at a time like this? What is there for all the people in the world to say to my wife at a time like this?