

The Acumen of Jeff

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I pulled the dipstick out of the engine. I had no idea what I was doing, but Sheila was watching and I desperately needed to impress her.

“The carburetor is squeezed,” I said. The thought of revealing my inadequacy scared me shitless. The air was thick with humidity. A storm was threatening. The only color for miles in either direction was tan. Dirty dirty tan. There are parts of northern Mississippi that are more desolate than any desert. Even the sky was tan. How the fuck is the sky tan, I asked myself. My shirt stuck to my chest with sweat. I tried to remember what my grandpa Jeff said to me.

“I don’t think it’s the carburetor,” Sheila said. “Are you sure you don’t want me to call a mechanic?”

“No,” I said with far too much intensity.

I wracked my brain. My grandpa insisted that I call him by his first name. “I ain’t old enough to be a grandpa,” he would say to me. “Call me by my name.” Jeff gave me a lot of advice. “Don’t knock up a girl before you marry her,” he told me once. “The baby’ll turn her sour towards you.” That wasn’t much help now.

I looked above me as a vulture flew by. “Really?” I said.

“Don’t go to bed angry,” he told me another time. Or was it “Don’t go to bed with an angry wife. You’ll never wake up”?

I pulled out my phone to text a friend for help. The batteries were dead. Why didn’t I charge my phone before we left? I cursed my poor planning. This trip was supposed to show Sheila that I was the man for her. We’d been having a rough time and I thought the drive to Tupelo would make her fall back in love with me. Instead, every moment had been agony. I could feel her eyes on me. She was probably thinking about that muscular guy back in Bartlett, the one who lived across the road and mowed the lawn without a shirt on, his abs sparkling with sweat. I swear I caught her staring out the window above the kitchen sink and drooling the other day. Drooling!

She claimed she was only pitting an avocado and some spittle slipped out, but I wasn’t born yesterday.

“All women lie,” Jeff told me. “Never let a woman think you got a weakness. They’ll grind you down ‘til there’s nothing left.”

“I’m going to walk until I find a gas station,” I said to Sheila.

“Why don’t you let me look at the engine?” she said.

“No. That won’t be necessary. I’ll be back with a mechanic.”

“Does this have something to do with that bitter twisted grandfather of yours? Let me take a damn look.”

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Without looking at her, I began walking down the dust covered highway. If this was a movie, this image would have been touching or intense or some other word that movie reviewers use to describe the cinematography. But it wasn't a movie. And instead, it sucked.

I squeezed my mind trying to remember what Jeff had told me about cars, but his advice on women was all that came to mind.

"Did he ever give me car advice?" I asked a disemboweled opossum thirty yards from the car and Sheila. I was starting to doubt it. When I was a boy, I viewed my grandpa as the wisest man on earth. This was in all likelihood because he was so readily available to give advice—solicited or not. Jeff was a war veteran and even though he'd stayed married to Granny for fifty-eight years, he complained about the agony of marriage every day.

I took Sheila to meet him once before Christmas a few years ago. Right when we were getting real serious. He pulled me aside before we left and told me "to get out before her tits went south." And then, "She looks like she has some real cow potential if you don't keep an eye on her feed." It didn't come as a surprise that Sheila was not impressed by him.

"He's a bastard," she said on the ride home. "A crotchety old puss."

"He's from a different generation," I offered in defense.

"I know plenty of old men from his generation who are not hateful. That's no excuse."

I kept replaying what Jeff said to me in private and stayed silent the whole rest of the car trip home.

Now it looked to be high noon. I wasn't positive since my phone was dead. But it felt like it. My skin was baking. I scratched the back of my neck at my hairline and pain rocketed out from my fingertips. I licked my lips. They were cracked and salty. I considered turning back towards the car. I didn't have water. I didn't know where I was going. I didn't want to apologize to her. I could really die out here, I thought.

There was an old tire on the shoulder, so I stopped and sat on it to catch my breath. "Think, man, think," whispered the dry grass.

When I was seven Granny had a broken arm. She had one of those old hard casts that smelled like wet bread. I remember asking her one time if it hurt. Jeff walked up behind the kitchen chair she was sitting in and pressed his rough thumbs down into her collarbone. She looked down at the cast. She said it hurt no more than mashing your thumb with a hammer. But I knew that was a lie. Her eyes were heavy like she wished that she hadn't done something. She went to stand up but Jeff held her in the chair. I don't think anyone ever told me how she broke it. I just remember my dad saying to Mom how she should call the cops on Jeff and Mom looking out the window in silence.

Thunder rolled and I yelled up at the dark clouds rolling in. I dug my knuckles into my temple. I felt rain drops dab my sweaty shirt and I kicked the old tire for forever and a day. What was I doing? Why couldn't I get along with Sheila? Friends of ours were perfectly happy with one another. But Sheila and I were not our friends. The wind blew hard. The trees around me rocked and I heard a branch crack like a bone. I got up and walked back to the car.

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“You’re right,” I said once I got back to the car. “He’s a fucking jerk.”

“I know,” she said through the cracked window. The rain had really picked up by then and Sheila was huddled in the driver’s seat as I was leaning my belly against the closed door. I looked through the window at her. Her skin looked lush and her eyes made me want to fall in. “It was low on coolant,” she said. “You didn’t have any in the trunk, so I put some bottled water in until we can get out of the storm. Get in the damn car,” She said.

“How did you know to do that?” I climbed into the passenger’s seat. Grease and water beaded my forehead. I jammed my hands in my pockets like a child who soiled his pants after he was far too old to do so.

“My granddaddy showed me,” she said. “Let’s go home.”

I didn’t understand what Jeff had done until today. And then, I wished I never had understood. Sheila drove and I climbed over the seat into the middle seat in the back. The a/c blew ice on my shirtless chest. I looked out the window at bare trees in the dark. Rankled and bent in the night time.