

Ditch

By Eric Beetner

It had been seven and a half days since his car went off the road and down the hill where it rested now, a part of the landscape. Lee wondered if they had given up the search yet. He wondered if they had replaced him at work. Sonsabitches wouldn't get what's comin' to 'em now.

The hunger had turned to a numbness, but the dehydration made his thoughts unclear. He tried one last time to lean, to reach and stretch, to the glove box where the gun was to maybe cut this agony short, but he could only get two fingers on the latch. Even if he had both arms and a crowbar the passenger side door was so caved in that it wouldn't have mattered.

The car sat still in a stand of five small trees, so perfectly wedged, it was like the car was there a hundred years ago and the tress had grown up around it. All the fluids had long since drained out of the car so it made no sound. The sun shone through the shattered hole that once was the sunroof. Normally, Lee never had it open since the sun hit his bald spot and caused a sunburn. A sunburn which led to flaky peeling, which only gave his co-workers more ammunition against him.

Not that he had given it much thought, but Lee had always figured that when death came slowly like this it would give a man time to reflect and reconcile his past. Now, over a week into the process of dying, he only realized how much he never finished; not even including his big plans for today (or, rather, seven days ago). Thinking about dying only depressed him and it was about all he could think about at this point. He'd given up counting which ribs he figured to be broken. He stopped trying to move his legs. He knew at least they were not severed; otherwise he would have bled to death by now. His left arm was still attached but in name only. It was so severely dislocated that it may as well be trapped under the steering wheel with his useless legs.

From above came a sound. Lee turned a bleary eye up, almost rolled all the way back in the socket. He waited. *Scurry*. Then a tiny head, busy whiskers.

The squirrel looked at Lee as if he had never seen a human before and indeed he may not have. Lee was still, as he had been for seven-plus days, so the squirrel advanced. He came down through the sunroof opening, touched two feet on the headrest of the passenger seat, then eased himself in. He immediately went to the scent of what brought him here in the first place; Lee's lunch bag. Brown craft paper just like Lee had when he was a boy. He did not feel the need to write his name on the outside anymore.

After so much silence, the sound of the squirrel searching through the paper bag was like gunfire to Lee's ears. He could have used his good right arm and reached out and swatted the little guy away but he scarcely had the energy. Besides, the bag had been empty since day two. Still, the squirrel persisted with his noisemaker. It emerged licking its chops. Probably some peanut butter left smeared on the inside of the plastic sandwich bag. That always happens.

A brief recon of the rest of the car and the squirrel left out of the right-side passenger window. Again Lee was alone. Not so bad, he thought. Lee had every intention of dying a week ago, so a little delay wasn't that big a deal. Still, those other bastards are still walkin' around, but what can you do now?

People always say drowning is the best way to go. It's supposed to be very peaceful. You just drift off to sleep. That's what Lee tried to do - drown on dry land. The sun shining in, birds calling and answering. Surrounded by an ocean of leaves. Even the distant sound of traffic on the highway sounded like waves washing ashore.

Lee closed his eyes. He had been there so long that the swelling had gone down in his left eye where he pulled a chunk of safety glass from it on the first day, just after he regained consciousness. He sat there and thought that life was just insomnia. All your life you're just struggling towards that one moment when you close your eyes and never wake up again. Everything leading up to it is just restless sleep deprivation. Now he was going to get some real sleep for once in his goddamn life.

It was day six when he officially forgot her name. Maybe it was the hunger or maybe just the coming blackness that cast a shadow over her name, but he forgot her. All of her. Her name, her face, her smell, her scars, her birthmark, and the funny shape of her ears like a fingerprint that, before, he could have picked out of millions. He forgot what she did to him.

He still remembered Rollo, but not as the guy who took her away, just as the guy on the drill press next to him. Good guy, he thought now, but the gun behind the glove box door was evidence of a recent differing opinion.

Lee remembered introducing Rollo to someone, a girl maybe, but her face came out all fuzzy. In fact, Lee remembered seeing a lot of Rollo and the fuzzy-face girl together. "Well good for them. Hope she comes in a little bit clearer for him," he thought.

Lee felt the breeze of a moth past his ear. He turned to watch the haphazard flight path of the moth as he bumped and banged his way between the dashboard and the splintered windshield glass. Lee almost thought it funny for a moment. "Trapped, just like me." This car is like a coffin for all who enter. As his mind drifted and free-associated the word car into carcass, the moth snagged and its flight path stopped as it became tangled in a spider's web that stretched across the corner of the dash and the door frame on the passenger side. The flailing of wings never stopped as it wrapped itself in silk, doing much of the spider's work for it. Lee hadn't even noticed the web there before, so well-hidden was it against the cracked safety glass of the front windshield. He felt a little guilty, as if somehow he had willed it to happen with his morbid thoughts of kinship between he and the moth.

He watched as the moth's struggles slowed but did not stop and the dancing of the web alerted the spider to emerge. Lee almost laughed again at seeing that the spider was much too small to ever devour a moth of that size. Now the moth would die and be left to rot in vain and the spider would have to start again on his web, his only crime being too good of a hunter.

It had been at least thirty-six hours since the last time he had been forced to urinate on himself, an act he could only tell had happened from the smell. His legs had been cold and numb since nearly the beginning and his whole lower torso went soon after that. Paralysis was one option he had thought of for Rollo. Worse than death in a lot of ways, but harder to accomplish. He had even done research about where to shoot to paralyze but not kill him. The T-4 vertebra was the golden boy. Total devastation but a good chance of missing any vital organs, especially with a small-caliber firearm. Still no

guarantee. Too risky. Once that first shot goes off - it is catch as catch can. No time to be counting bumps in his spinal column. Get Rollo, Mr. McAllen for letting it happen, and two bullets for...what was her name?

On the fifth day nothing happened. The sun rose and then set again, that's about all you could say about the day. The big drama came around noon when two crows perched in the biggest of the five trees that held the car in place. One crow got too close to the other and a fight ensued. In the tussle, a small branch, about three feet long with no leaves, broke free and fell down onto the hood. At first Lee had the ridiculous thought of: "Damn, that's going to chip the paint," but then quickly realized his foolishness.

He'd never felt like a bigger fool than when Sierra had to come right out and say it on the floor of the machine shop about her and Rollo. She hadn't been staying over at her sister's house - she'd been with him. Her Mother didn't have cancer at all - she just needed an excuse. A thick wall of lies piled three or four thick kept him from seeing the truth. But everyone else could see and now they saw him being humiliated center stage on the shop floor. She even had to shout over those few in the corners who couldn't see what was going on and so kept their machines running.

Each hole stamped through the center of a 3/4 inch steel disk hit Lee right in the spine around the T-4 and froze him to the spot.

"For how long?"

"Five months. Are you that blind, Lee?"

"Is it serious? Are you gonna stay with him?"

"Yes, Lee. That's what I'm telling you. We're gonna get married."

"Well now wait, I only just heard about this. You have to give me a chance to win you back."

"Christ, Lee! You lost me the second you introduced us. We started dating two days later."

"Behind my back?"

"Christ, Lee - right under your nose! We've been fucking in Mr. McAllen's office on lunch break for four months."

McAllen, from the relative safety of his office window high above the shop floor, shrunk back behind the blinds away from Lee's withering stare.

Rollo was there, looking to defend his girl's honor. Hell, hoping Lee would take a poke at him so Rollo could slug him with the fist he held in his coverall pocket, clenched around some 60-weight Grip-Tite nuts. But Lee stood paralyzed, cataloging this day in his very long list of bad days and deciding that maybe this was the one that finished the list. Only one more thing to do now.

That was one month and five days ago. Only five days ago was when he left the house for the last time, telling himself: "Things are really going to happen today." Even above the din of the shop floor they would all hear Lee's retort to what Sierra had said, a month late perhaps, but worth the wait. Instead, he's pinned under the steering wheel of an '87 Buick LeSabre that was a hand-me-down after his father died. And absolutely nothing happened today.

On day four, Lee could still feel his own pulse. A measure of alertness was still in his eyes and the last of his body's adrenaline was being doled out in thin droplets, chasing the panic down his veins.

Early in the morning, his right front tooth finally came loose. Rocking it back and forth with his tongue had become a habit, and now the root finally gave way and the tinfoil taste of blood hit his tongue. He looked for a good place to keep it as if maybe they could return it to the gum line. He dropped it into the cup holder and began rocking the incisor next to it.

That was also the day he heard the siren. Hope had not diminished, but if there was one incident that killed it going forward, that was it. It was late afternoon when he heard it. It was the Highway Patrol; they had a different sound than an ambulance. Lee heard it stop on the ridge right above where he was. At the part of the curve with no guardrail, right at the spot with no skid marks. A hundred and fifty feet up the embankment and above the trees that now camouflaged the Buick.

It stopped right there. Lee tried the horn again but still nothing sounded no matter how hard he pushed. He thought he remembered hearing it just as the car hit the trees. One sharp bleat and then dead. Just another layer in the mix of sounds a car makes when it falls fifteen stories into a grove of trees. If he had made it over the trees and all the way down to the river, would it have been any better for him? Probably the rocks would have killed him instantly. Then he would be found in early spring when the snowmelt run-off brings the whitewater rafters back to the river.

But instead he was snagged and held gently in the arms of his new caretakers. Some would call it a miracle he wasn't killed, but he was killed when that car went over the edge – just not right away. He was killed right then and there with a seven-and-a-half day countdown.

He never did hear the siren start up again and leave. More like the trooper finished writing up his speeding ticket and just moved on. That's when the hope left him. That was the first time he reached for the glove box, the first time he found it jammed shut.

But not the first time he wished he could just shoot himself in the head and end this.

On the third night, Lee heard footsteps all around him. Padded feet, moving in fours, crunching leaves and snapping twigs.

Wolves? he thought. *Coyotes?* Which do they have in these parts? Which is worse?

He never saw them, only heard the rough exhale of a long snout. He heard the quick inhale of a canine testing the wind. The smell of blood lingered in the air for those more sensitive than humans but was also masked by fuel and brake fluid and oil. Lee decided that would be a really lousy way to go. Being trapped, the wolves would have their way with him. If he were lucky, they would start below at his numb and useless legs and cause him to bleed to death before the rest of him went. But no, he thought, these bastards know what they're doing. They'll go for the throat.

In his worry he completely forgot about the nine-millimeter. He sat still, listening and imagining a frontier family hearing a pack of wolves outside the covered wagon.

They would cling the baby tight to the mother's bosom as father loaded the Winchester. All Lee had on his side was the shell of an '87 LeSabre and some off-putting smells.

They must have been enough because by the time the scenario in his head had played out to the father slaughtering a dozen wolves in just thirteen shots, the woods outside were silent again.

Earlier that day he had drained the last of his water bottle. He thought it odd how refreshing even hot water can be when you are truly thirsty. His rationing had done him well. It may have been morbid, but in the end it was a good idea to plan for three days out here. By now the search had gone to a helicopter or small plane, so soon he would be picked up and all the readers of tomorrow's paper would be impressed with his forethought. Then finally a doctor could look at his ribs and put his shoulder back in place. He knew it would be painful, but after what he'd already been through his tolerance had gone up considerably. And once they could crack the frame of the car and lift the steering column off his torso he would be able to feel his legs again. That again, he knew would bring pain, but sometimes pain is better than no feeling at all.

And it would come out in the interview with the late local news, live from his hospital bed, what she had done.

"What made you swerve off that cliff, Lee?"

"Well, Connie, I was lost in thought. Absolutely consumed by grief from my girlfriend - excuse me, *ex*-girlfriend and her betrayal."

"And what is her name?"

"Oh no, Connie. She knows what she's done. I'm not in the business of vengeance."

At least not anymore. Someday, when this all blows over, Lee will pay Rollo a visit late one night. Then all the plans of two days ago will come to fruition. And who would suspect him? The man with the sad story on top of tragedy and deep emotional and physical distress and that bitch who drove him - literally drove him - off into that ditch and left him to die. Why would you throw away a great guy like that?

Yeah. Let the court of public opinion render a verdict on Sierra and Rollo. Then Lee would deliver the sentence. The thought was enough to keep Lee going into the night until he heard the footsteps.

Day two saw the end of his food, what there was of it. A peanut butter and raspberry jelly sandwich, a bag of chips and a Snickers bar. It was number three on a rotating schedule of lunches, of which there were only three. PB&J with chips, PB&J with a yogurt cup and PB&J with an apple. The candy bar depended on whatever was on sale that week. His sweet tooth he got from his mother, who topped out at 320 pounds and had a foot amputated from diabetes.

Today he was glad to have the King-size Snickers. He ate that on the first night down in the trees. Chocolate melts, he figured. "I don't want to waste a perfectly good food source."

Breakfast on day two was half a peanut butter sandwich and the last half of a Gatorade that had been pushed out from beneath the seat during the accident. It landed within reach of Lee's good arm. Warm and sticky-sweet, it did the job and kept him hydrated.

Lunch started with half a bag of chips. The air turned ammonia when he pissed himself. He couldn't feel the hot liquid down his leg but he heard a few drops hit the floor mat and the unmistakable smell confirmed it. Even alone and in these extenuating circumstances he felt embarrassed to have done it, mostly because when they found him, it would end up as a detail on some report. He didn't want anyone to think he had done it out of fear.

Just after lunch he got a bit of a nap when he attempted to put back his dislocated shoulder. He had seen it done in college on the football field and knew it took a lot of force to punch the ball back into the socket. So he wound up with all of his might and slammed his shoulder into the side of the door just below the seatbelt ring. The pain hit like a headache that spread to his entire body and turned the car black. He awoke an hour later but did not know how long he had been out. Lee decided to let a doctor handle it. He let his left arm dangle for the next five days.

Dinner was the second half of the peanut butter sandwich and the rest of the chips, along with a minimum rationed amount of his water bottle. It struck him that he had no idea why he picked today to pack his lunch at all. It was lunchtime that he planned to do it. After Sierra's confession of the lunch break trysts in McAllen's office, Lee had been watching them with interest. He found it to be true. They would eat a hurried lunch and then steal away and head up the stairs towards McAllen's office. That son of a bitch was a co-conspirator.

The plan was to wait for them to adjourn to their love nest high above the shop floor and then catch them in the act. The sight of that alone would steel Lee enough to pull the trigger a promised four times minimum. Two for each of them. There's nothing worse than an attempted murder, successful suicide. That would scarcely make the front page.

Getting McAllen was a bonus. He knew damn well what was going on. He lingered at lunch, went to the storehouse to check up on inventory. What was in it for him? Maybe nothing more than to watch Lee twist in the wind. To sit up in that high window all afternoon and smell the sex and peer down at Lee and Rollo working side by side. Did he laugh, or just relish in smug satisfaction at seeing such a specimen as Lee, all bald head and spare tire gut, clueless and betrayed? Lee wondered if the game had lost its fun now that he knew. Was it too late for McAllen to back out of his deal with the two lovers? Or did he just know that they would do their fucking on company time anyhow and this way he got them back to the shop floor faster.

If McAllen heard the shots and fled to the parking lot to speed away from the shop, his workers now trapped inside with a gunman - if that happened, then fine. The two targets gone, Lee would turn the gun on himself because that's what is done, as laid out in the instructions of countless postal workers, disgruntled employees and jilted lovers before.

Lee measured the water left in his water bottle. He tore off the label and lay his fingers against the side. Each finger became one ration every six hours. He figured that way he could make it all the way to Day Three if the rescue team hadn't made it before then, which they surely would.

Three hours after his car went over the edge, Lee came to and was finally able to stay awake. He had been in and out; never awake for more than a few foggy minutes at a

time. The pain came at him from all sides as well as from the inside-out. His left shoulder felt dismantled, he reached up his right hand and felt around his eyes, which burned each time he tried to open them. He came back with a sizeable chunk of safety glass from under the eyelid of his left eye. Blood was on it and the hot blood now filled the void left in the eye socket and overflowed to run down his left cheek and over the swelling on his lip where his mouth had hit the steering wheel. It felt odd to him, like the time he had his root canal and the Novocain made his face feel bloated and somehow not a part of him. But where the Novocain brought a numbness, this was the same puffy bloat along with a new fat pain. He surveyed the inside of his mouth with his tongue and his left front tooth moved liberally at his touch.

The engine still gave off warmth and some liquid dropped to the ground. The engine fluid smell was what Lee imagined an engine operating room would smell like when the engine was splayed open by a surgeon. "It's called a mechanic shop, stupid," ran his thoughts, and then the realization that this was not the time to argue with himself.

An attempt to move his legs was met with something more than resistance. A denial, really. Some total disconnect that caused his legs to rudely ignore his commands. "What are those things? Jaws of life. I'll bet they have to use those. So much for the Buick. Dad would have been pissed. Thankfully, he's dead." His thoughts continued in random, skittery patterns. He thought of the old adage – if a tree falls in the woods... Well what about a car? He made himself laugh. He still could because an ambulance was surely already on its way.

At the moment the car left the sanctuary of the asphalt, Lee had not been focused on the road at all for at least two minutes. He was replaying the plan in his mind over and over again. Not to rehearse - he had the motions down - but just to relive the pure pleasure of it. To see the surprise on their faces again and again. The glee in shooting them naked, or as close as they came to naked during a nooner. Rollo with his pants around his ankles, his hairy back to Lee exposing each vertebra like a forensics model, would be just as satisfying. In Lee's mind, Sierra would see him first and know an instant before Rollo was shot. Then as he fell dead against her she would know she was next. Lee could see her clearly as if projected like a movie onto the windshield of the car as she scrambled to pull Rollo's dead prick from inside her while thinking of what to say to Lee so he might spare her life. For Lee, no last words were needed. Two shots for her and then try for the McAllen bonus.

It was her frozen face that was the last image he saw before gravity took hold and the realization hit that he was no longer on the highway but at once below it but also high above the ground. The LeSabre fell and a cascade of sound began as the first branches hit the body and then a raging river of noise that culminated in the tremendous crash of metal that signaled the end of the line and the failure of his plans.

When he finished packing his lunch, Lee was surprised how much like a normal day it felt. He had showered and shaved, prepared PB&J #3, keys in his hand ready to make his eleventh straight year of on-time arrival. The only difference was the gun. After so many hours at the shooting range, even that was starting to feel like an ordinary accessory to his daily routine.

He shut the creaky LeSabre door and pushed in a puff of seat cushion foam that was peeking out from the widening hole in the slate blue upholstery, set his lunch on the seat passenger next to him and chose to keep the gun in the glove box for safety sake.

Just and ordinary Tuesday. This is going to be easy.

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