

WHOSE VAN IS THAT ON FIRE OUT THERE?

by Chris Orcutt

It's two o'clock on a bright Sunday afternoon in February, and Eddie and I are picking out a couple movies at Crossroads when a man the size of a phone booth steps into the room, clutches the straps of his overalls, and booms out, "Whose van is that on fire out there?"

I can feel all of my bodily functions shutting down in recognition of the words "van" and "fire." I have a van, but it couldn't possibly be on fire. I don't smoke, and neither does Eddie. My van better not be on fire; I just spent sixteen dollars to fill the gas tank.

I dart over to the mystery section, shove a kid out of the way, and gape out the front window. Yes, a van is on fire. A brown van, a brown Dodge van with white roof racks—my van—is on fire. And not a little fire, mind you. This is a *Towering Inferno*, steel-melting, people-on-the-roof-screaming-for-the-helicopter kind of fire. From where I watch, about fifteen feet up, the flames shooting out of the engine are higher than the windows. I bolt downstairs and outside to the parking lot. Jaded New Yorkers file past the pyre as if saying to themselves, "*Hey, look—there's a van on fire. That's peculiar.*" All I can think of is the thing exploding and someone getting decapitated by a chunk of shrapnel and suing my poor

father who has suffered enough bad luck with cars. I try to shoo people away from the danger, but it's no use. I bow my head in acceptance of the fact that I've lost another vehicle, and not six months after the last one.

* * *

Another bright Sunday afternoon, this time in October. Dad and I have just picked up some videos from Crossroads and are driving home with the fallen leaves tumbling across the road in great migrations of scarlet, pumpkin and gold. I'm driving because I like the stick shift and because Dad likes to sit back in his seat and listen to the wind whistle through the cracked windows.

It's a gusty day. We get home, Dad makes a drink. Cracking of ice cubes, football playing on the TV. Mom's set out a clam dip pie and Ritz crackers. And then Sandy goes to the window and says, “Dad, why's the car floating in the pond?”

“Sandy, cut that out.”

“No Dad, look.”

Dad goes to the window. He looks. He blinks. He takes off his glasses and rubs his eyes, puts his glasses back on, and sure enough, the Subaru is floating in the pond, its engine submerged and its trunk angling out of the water in a way reminiscent of the final moments of the *Titanic*.

“Jesus Christ, Alex, get the boat!”

We galumph downstairs, look at a chain, but choose a heavy rope instead. I sprint down to the boat, which is tied up on the far side of the pond, against the red bridge. I have to wait for Dad, and when he finally gets there he climbs into the bow, making it difficult for me to shove off. Dad swears while I'm fumbling with the oars, trying to get a good rhythm.

“Can’t you row?” he barks.

“You never taught me, all right?”

My father doesn’t recognize the irony of the situation like I do; given that he grew up on an island off the coast of Maine, *I* of all kids should know how to do this. Instead he snarls and just points ahead at the slowly foundering Subaru. Then, as if sensing that his impatience might be hindering us in reaching the car, he gives me my first and only lesson on rowing.

“You’re dipping the oars in too much,” he says. “Keep ’em close to the surface.”

By the time I get us on course, we’ve reached the rear bumper. The car is almost vertical now, and Dad has to stand up. He ties the rope to something underneath the bumper and feeds out line as I chop for shore. However instead of waiting until we’re all the way in, Dad jumps off into what *looks like* a foot of water, but unfortunately it’s more like four feet, immersing him up to his armpits. His face registers a combination of surprise and irritation as he clutches the rope and plows through the muck.

I join him on dry land and await instructions, which take the form of him throwing me the end of the rope and yelling, “Pull!” So we pull. Since Dad is in front of me, like the man closest to the mud pit in tug-of-war, he stands the most to lose and therefore is doing the majority of the pulling. By the time the rope reaches me, I feel like all I’m really pulling is Dad, so I grip the rope half-heartedly and lean back on it.

“What the hell are you doing?” Dad says. “Pull!”

Although I’m convinced the Subaru’s sinking is inevitable, Dad will have none of this and is heartened when he halts its descent and shifts its momentum toward us. Dad heaves on the rope with every cell in his body intent on rescuing the family automobile. Blood vessels swell in his face and neck. Strange, primordial creaking sounds escape his throat. It worries

me, and suddenly I feel guilty for not pulling as hard as I’m capable. But Dad has made progress; the car is now only twenty feet from land. Switching to a different tactic, he turns, throws the rope over his shoulder, and drives forward in his best imitation of a powerful horse, like a Clydesdale. By now I’ve given up and stand on the grass watching, but with my hands at my sides and not in my pockets because having my hands out makes me feel that even if I’m not actually doing anything, there is at least the *potential* for me to help if asked.

Sadly, where there was once hope, there is now only despair. The rear bumper slips under the water, and it hits Dad—the car is not floating in the pond, but has sunk to the bottom. Although ten or twelve feet down, its silver paint shimmers in the light. Dad gives a few final tugs and then he is not holding the rope anymore, as if the rope itself has given up. His shoulders sag and he puffs heavily, and I have the terrible feeling I have caused my father to lose something much greater than a car, that he has forever lost his faith in the universe, that nothing will ever be right again. And, we still have to get the car out of the pond. He marches past me without saying anything and fades into the garage.

* * *

I’m staring at the van, listening to the ping and hiss of unseen parts and fluids being consumed by the blaze, when a small, gray-bearded man approaches. I must be seething because he taps me meekly on the arm and hands me a miniature fire extinguisher.

“I see your van is on fire,” he says. “Take this.”

A sudden sense of possibility wells up in my brain and surges through my limbs. Grabbing the toy fire extinguisher, I race across the snowy parking lot to my flaming van. I yank out the safety ring, aim the nozzle at the engine grill, and spray. A small poof of white dust coughs out of the extinguisher, and the flames, clearly insulted by an attack from such an

impotent adversary, lash out and singe the hair on my knuckles. Desperate, I beat the engine hood with the canister until Eddie practically tackles me from behind and drags me to the side of the road.

“Fire department’s coming,” he says.

“What’s the deal with these morons?” I nod at the people milling around the parking lot like stray cows. “There’s a friggen van on fire and they act like they see it all the time.”

“They do, if they live in the Bronx,” Eddie says.

Up to now, Eddie has been a model of serenity, actually pausing once during the crisis to retie his boots. Next thing I know, his olive skin goes white.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“The catcher’s equipment.”

I forgot. It’s all of Eddie’s father’s old gear, which we’d been using in the gym after school for pre-season practice.

“Too dangerous,” I say. “Leave it.”

“I can’t.”

“Eddie—”

My friend skis across the parking lot and throws open the rear doors. Instantly he is greeted by a cloud of vile blackness. Turning his head, he gulps a lungful of fresh air before plunging into the choking cauldron. Ten seconds pass. Twenty. I edge closer, prepared to dive in and if necessary die a painful and ignominious death to save my friend. Then equipment begins to fly out the doors. The catcher’s mask. The chest protector. A ball, three gloves, two bats, a bag of Doritos, and finally, the shin guards, the plastic slightly smoldering. Eddie leaps out hacking uncontrollably. The gear rests on the snow in a steaming heap.

“Mission accomplished,” he says between coughs, and at that moment I fear these will be his last words, that he has inhaled some poisonous gas and my friend will soon be just another statistic in the issue of flame-retardant seat cushions.

But he’s okay. We drag the equipment to safety, and as the first fire trucks arrive, I point at the van for them, as if there might be *another* blazing van nearby.

Before the fire trucks can move into position, a Baywatch yellow pickup skids into the parking lot, kicking up snow on Eddie and me. Kelly Knight, a svelte dirty blonde who sometimes massages my shoulders in Government class, jumps out of the cab with a giant fire extinguisher and starts blasting the fire from ten feet away, walking toward it as she sprays. By the time she reaches the van, the flames are dead, but she shoots her cannon into the wheel wells and under the engine block just to be sure. Finished, she calmly stows the extinguisher back in the cab and primps her hair in the side mirror. The other firemen eye her coolly from the pumper truck as they light cigarettes and sip coffee the store owner brought out.

“Can I help it if you boys are slow?” Kelly says.

They grumble, and one of them tosses a snowball at her truck. Eddie drifts away to join them.

With a wink, Kelly struts over and envelops me in a purposeful hug. Her black fireman’s jacket with the fluorescent stripes is open, putting her pert breasts in direct contact with my thin sweatshirt.

“You okay, sweetie?” Her breath warms my frozen ear.

“Getting there,” I say.

The problem is, just like in Government class, Kelly’s very presence makes a certain part of me stiffen up harder than bamboo. However, unlike Government class, I don’t have a

three-ring binder to shield the thing. Right now it’s poking into her stomach, so I’m convinced she knows what’s going on. I need her long jacket to cover myself.

“I’m freezing. Hey, can I borrow that?”

“Of course.” She narrows her eyes at me and wiggles out of the coat. She knows, and she seems to like it.

“Where’s Eddie?” I look around for him, but he’s gone—along with the baseball equipment.

“I saw Lara pull in,” Kelly says. “Probably got a ride with her.”

To be honest, I’m a little annoyed at Eddie for ditching me in my hour of need. My father tends to believe him before he does me, and besides, I feel like Eddie should share the blame for the fire—after all, he was with me when it happened.

Kelly nudges me in the ribs. “So, you coming with me or what?”

“You? I’d rather walk.”

“Sure you would. Get in.”

In the cab, I barely have time to put on my seatbelt before Kelly slaps the shifter into reverse, spins the front end around, and barrels the pickup onto Route 17. Hanging on a hook behind the seat is another fire jacket like the one I’m wearing, and there are stickers on the windows for the Union Vale and Willowbrook fire departments. You think you know someone, but you don’t.

I gesture behind us with my thumb. “That was amazing, the way you handled that. Just snuffed it out like it was a grease fire.”

She takes my hand and rubs the fleshy webbing between my fingers. I’m trying to remain calm, staring out the window at the snowy fields—corn fields, baseball fields, regular

fields, all kinds of fields—when something brushes against my leg. I jerk my foot onto the seat.

“What the hell?”

“Relax, it’s only Wayne,” Kelly says. “My bunny.”

“Wayne?”

“What, doesn’t he look like a Wayne?”

“As in John Wayne?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, I can see it.” I’m lying. Wayne makes two small hops and snuggles onto some newspaper under the heating vent.

“What’s next, a tiger?” I say. “It’s like a circus in here.”

“I guess it is.” Kelly throws open my jacket, exposing my soldier at attention. “And look, we’ve got our very own big top.”

I don’t know if it’s a general circus theme or one written specifically for Barnum and Bailey, but whatever it is, she begins humming it, slowly at first, gradually increasing the tempo as she plays with my soldier, which is still groping around in the dark of my sweatpants. A moment later, he becomes a stick-shift and Kelly goes through the gears while making engine noises.

“Easy,” I say, “I’m not a dump truck.”

She snaps her fingers. “Off with the pants.”

“Here? Now?”

“Here and now, honey.” There’s a wicked glint in her eyes.

“And drive?”

“I’m very coordinated,” she says. “Now off.”

“All right.” I peel the sweatpants down to my ankles and sit there feeling foolish.

“Come closer,” she says.

I unbuckle my seat belt and slide over to the center of the bench seat. She puffs into her right hand.

“Might be a bit cold at first.”

“That’s okay.”

She leans over slightly from the steering wheel, glancing at me but mostly watching the road. Her fingers are long, slender, and surprisingly silky. After a couple false starts, she gets a grip and rhythm that’s just right.

“At least one of my hands is getting warm,” she says.

I look down at Wayne, who seems to be ignoring me. He blinks in the heat from the blower. Kelly, meanwhile, continues to work on me while driving. She truly is coordinated—the truck hasn’t swerved once. I just hope she’s a natural, and that she hasn’t honed this skill through long practice.

“What if someone sees?” I say.

“They can’t, we’re too high up. Chill out already.”

So I do. With each pulse of her hand, the crisis with the van becomes more distant. The snow outside, the heat inside, the rabbit—it’s surreal. A moment later I’m on the edge of fainting and must let out a gasp signaling the finish because Kelly grins and the next thing I know she’s reaching over and patting me dry with McDonald’s napkins.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Better?”

“Much.”

Kelly finishes wiping off her hand and tosses the napkins out the window. As she cranks it shut, I suddenly remember I’m in her truck.

“Hey, what’s up with the van?” I ask. “You had me so flustered back at the store, I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Flustered, huh?” Kelly squeezes my knee. “Hate to break it to you, pumpkin, but the van’s gone. Toast.”

“It’s definitely totaled, I take it.”

“The radiator melted if that tells you anything. You’ll have to get it towed.” She smirks. “What about your dad? Has he gotten over the Subaru yet?”

Kelly knows about the Pond Incident because I told her. That’s me, impressing the ladies with my automotive exploits. Funny thing is, it works, as evidenced by what happened about five minutes ago.

“I see him staring out at the pond once in a while. I think he wants to chew me out, but he can’t ’cause it was an accident.”

“What about this one?” Kelly asks.

“I’ll tell him the truth,” I say. “That I don’t know *what* happened.”

“He’s going to be pissed, huh?”

“Probably. But I think he’s resigned to having crappy luck with cars. This one’s the fourth you know.”

“Four? What were the other two?”

“Well, there’s the Toyota Eddie rolled after the prom last year.”

“Ah, yes,” she said. “And the fourth?”

“I was thirteen. My mom’s Chevette burned up in the driveway. Dad tried to save it with a garden hose, but it happened too fast.”

“I should have been there,” she says. “I’m good with a hose.”

“The best,” I say.

We drive for a few minutes in silence, looking out over the white countryside. The snow is pristinely smooth with occasional tiny drifts, like ridges of icing on a wedding cake. A pair of quail glide across the road and dip into a hollow on the other side. I massage Kelly’s scalp, and she presses the back of her head into my fingers.

“Mmmm.”

“The least I can do.” I point up the road. “Up ahead, that’s my driveway.”

She eases the truck onto the shoulder and puts it in park. As if on cue, Wayne hops into Kelly’s lap. The blower is noisy now that we’ve stopped, so I shut it off. She pets the rabbit’s head and looks at me.

“Are you scared?”

“Not really.”

I try to sound convincing, but I think she detects my unease.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” Kelly says. “What if we say screw it and just keep driving?”

“And come back later tonight? Then he’ll be even more upset.”

“No, no, I mean *keep driving*, as in leave. You and me. We go to Florida, Maine, North Carolina, someplace like that.”

“And do what?”

“We get caretaking jobs, on the ocean,” she says. “One of my cousins does it. She gets to live there for free.”

I shift in my seat to face her. “You’re serious.”

Kelly’s nostrils flare, and I know she’s not kidding.

“I’ve got the truck and a credit card,” she says. “What’s keeping us here, school? Our so-called friends?”

I shrug. When I was thirteen, I dreamed I ran away with a girl, and at the time it seemed the most beautiful thing imaginable. Now faced with a real opportunity to do it, all I can think of is how incapable I am of taking care of myself, much less a teenage bride.

“Believe me, I’d love to,” I say. “But there’s no way. My mother would die of worry.”

She nods and strokes the rabbit.

“At least let me come in with you,” she says. “I can vouch for the whole thing.”

Fact is, I’d love for her to join me—after all, misery loves company—but having the girl there who gratified me sexually not more than half an hour ago, while I try to explain a burned-up van, just isn’t going to work.

“I appreciate it, Kell, but this is something I’ve got to do alone.”

Petting the bunny, she gazes out upon my neighbor’s farm with its crooked fences and ramshackle silos. A car whooshes by with its headlights on. We watch it swing down Brush Hill Road and disappear into the twilight. Kelly purses her lips, turns to me.

“Want another handjob?”

“No, I’m all set.”

“Okay then, we’re going in.”

We cross the road and coast down the driveway. Driving past the pond, Kelly lingers at the spot where the car rolled in, and after a few seconds that I wish would last forever, stops in front of the house. Without realizing it, she’s parked in the exact place the Subaru was.

“So,” she says.

“So.” I look at Wayne, then her. “Hey, it’s not North Carolina, but you want to go out this weekend? Maybe a movie?”

“Only if we sit way in the back,” she says.

I’m unsure whether to kiss her since we recently engaged in what most people consider a *slightly* more intimate activity. But her pink lips prove irresistible. We kiss, and I caress her earlobe before pulling away.

“Go face the music,” she says. “I’ll see you in Government tomorrow. If you’re still alive, that is.”

It’s not until I’m out of the cab and she’s halfway down the driveway that I realize I still have Kelly’s firefighter’s jacket on. This is good, though, because it will make me that much more credible with my father. I decide the jacket is a bizarre letter sweater between Kelly and me, that it means we’re in some kind of relationship now—an idea that fills me simultaneously with excitement and dread.

The garage door is open, like he knows I’m coming, but he couldn’t possibly. I wipe my feet on the shaggy outdoor mat and open the screen door. Inside now, I slip off my sneakers. My feet are sweaty but surprisingly free of odor. Even though my bedroom is down here, I smell the mildew for the first time. Scant light trickles down from upstairs, and with the exception of a radio playing low somewhere, it’s eerily quiet. I mount the stairs and

start up. I get three steps before a voice thunders down on me like God’s did when Adam and Eve screwed up.

“Alex?”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“You burnt the van, didn’t ’ya?”

“Yeah, Dad.”