The Way Back

by Dominic Preziosi

At first he has ordinary hopes. There's nothing to fear, there's no reason to worry. The car has been parked there for slightly more than a day now, and nothing has occurred—there's nothing "unusual," nothing "amiss." Except that it's there, still, as he follows his boys to school.

Follows, because they don't want him to walk alongside them anymore. No more holding hands, no more silly conversations, no more imaginary journeys conjured on the fly to make the trip more interesting, to make the anxiety they can't or won't admit to go away. It's the compromise he's settled for: He'll trail far enough behind that they won't be embarrassed, but close enough that he can still keep them in sight. He doesn't remember being so insistent at their ages—eleven and nine—although maybe he was. But he wants to be with them. And it's become easier, now that he's on the evening shift, helping the kind of people who come into the superstore on the way home from work, the way he used to.

But the car. He hasn't mentioned it to anyone else yet, because he doesn't want to cause any undue alarm. There is too much undue alarm, in his opinion, too much needless dread these days, over nothing. Heading back to the house, he keeps a close eye on it. He saw the driver yesterday, rooting around in the back seat—although he didn't really see the driver. It was more like he saw the driver's feet, dangling from the open back-seat door like warning flags tied to an overhanging load on the rear of a truck. They were in battered white basketball shoes, and they twitched and turned as their unseen owner did whatever it was he was doing inside.

Now, though, there are no signs of activity. It's just the car, a Ford LTD station wagon with fake wood paneling and maroon paint, one of the huge ones the parents of half his childhood friends piloted in the 1970s, navigating the peaceful suburban streets like novice ship captains. The wagon sits low by the curb, and he can see it's filled with junk, from the driver's seat all the way on back, to what they

used to call “the way back”—piled clothing, newspapers, coat hangers, a clock radio wrapped in its own cord. There are padded blankets, like the kind movers use, tied to the roof rack, as well as a folded lawn chair and single bicycle wheel, which has a bent rim. Everything looks damp, tattered, or broken, as if it's been hauled around forever, or maybe plucked off a trash heap. Like an old joke about old cars, its tailpipe is strung with rusted wire to the undercarriage. He doesn't see anyone inside, but it's not tough to imagine someone sleeping, huddled beneath the piles like a burrowing rodent—or maybe something bigger, settling in its den, ready for hibernation.

He doesn't take the action that would give him the information he needs, which is to go closer and knock on the windows. Instead, he casts his cautious eye, notes once more the car is parked far enough from the hydrant, that the tags are valid, that the inspection sticker isn't out of date. That there is nothing amiss, which means there is nothing he can do, and, maybe, nothing to worry about.

In the middle of the night he looks down at it from the bedroom. A heap, a junker, a bomb. His wife rolls over and throws out a hand, as if beckoning him back to bed, but she doesn't know what she's doing or why he's up; she's asleep. The lights of other cars flicker and slide along its paneling, dance on the flat black glass of the rear windshield, like moonlight on a lake. Maybe, he suddenly thinks, it's been abandoned, parked here and left for dead in the hopes of an insurance payout. Anything is possible. Maybe there's no one inside. Maybe he's acting like the people he can't stand, getting way out ahead on things, seeing trouble where none exists, making something out of nothing and getting all worked up for no reason. He comes back to bed, gently lifts his wife's arm, and slides beneath it.

Following at a safe distance behind his boys on the way to school the next morning, though, he spies something outside the passenger seat window. When he gets closer, he sees it's a towel—dark-blue terrycloth, ribbed at its end—pinched between the glass and the

rubber run-around, as if hanging to dry. He casts a quick glance at his boys, who are already adding to the lead they have on him. He extends his finger. The towel is damp. It wasn't there the day before.

His wife doesn't have to be into the office until ten today, so she's still at home when he gets back from the school.

Listen, he says, and he tells her about the car.

She holds her coffee in both hands and looks at him with wide eyes. So is someone living in it, you think?

I don't know.

But you haven't seen anyone. Isn't that what you said?

What I said was there was someone, yesterday. Leaning in through the open door, practically flat on his stomach looking for something.

So it's a man.

I only saw a pair of sneakers.

Men's sneakers, though.

I guess. I mean, yeah—they must have been. And dirty jeans.

Well? Should we call someone?

The police?

Yes, the police. It's illegal to live out of your car, isn't it? In a residential neighborhood? Vagrancy, or something?

We don't know that anyone is living in it.

But the wet towel.

It could be anything. He steps around her and helps himself to coffee, then turns and says: It's right where all the kids pass on the way to school.

God. She shudders. Don't even say that.

Anyone can come right up off the highway, he says, and for a moment the thought of it is almost thrilling—nearly as thrilling as the flare of fear in his wife's eyes. Any kind of person, from anywhere—from anywhere in the country.

Call the police, then. Will you?

A few minutes later, as she's leaving, she asks again.

I'll keep on eye on it, he tells her. We still don't know what's what.

The strange thing about it is how familiar it is. He can imagine the contours of the seats, the slippery humps of leather or whatever it was they used to simulate leather, under his haunches. He can smell the mildew inside the air conditioning vents. He sees the hard plastic grips of the steering wheel and a forgotten mother's slender fingers in the ridges, one thumb turned up so the shine of her red nail polish is visible from where he sits in back, winking at him like the glistening tip of a tongue peeking through teeth. It's all there, all at once, all from just staring at it from his front window.

But he still hasn't seen anyone, even though he feels like he's been watching the thing for hours on end. There's work to do around the house, after all, laundry and bed-making, and even though he doesn't have to be at the store until evening the chores are weighing on him more than they usually do. He still has his shoes on, and his jacket, with his keys and cell phone in his pocket, just in case.

But just in case what? Just in case the towel vanishes? Because that's what happens. When he looks, it's gone. Maybe it simply fell from where it was wedged, but then it would be there at the curb, pooled on itself, in clear sight. He blinks, wondering how he missed it. He hasn't been away from the window for long enough—but then, clearly he has, since the towel is not there and he didn't see anyone move it. Regardless, it proves nothing. He realizes this now: It could have been placed there by anyone, owner or otherwise, and removed by anyone, plucked from where it had hung, by anyone who happened to pass.

He pours the last of the coffee. He has his shoes and jacket on, and in his pocket is his cell phone. In case he needs anything. In case anything really is wrong.

Approaching from behind, one cautious step after the other, he realizes it's stupid to think he has to sneak up on it. It is, as they say, broad daylight; the overhanging branches rise and fall with the wind like a boat on gentle waves; a line of shrubs along the yard next door

hides its usual collection of chattering birds. This is his neighborhood, his family's home, the community into which they've sunk their roots—for better or worse but generally for the better. He has no reason to be afraid.

Rust has taken a big bite out of the wagon's rear rocker panel, and the tires seem to be losing air. He didn't notice these things before, but rust can act fast, tires can deflate in no time, so it's possible this has happened since it's been parked here. He passes alongside, then, when he gets to the front, he steps off the curb. His idea is to circle the car, to take the full measure of things.

A section of the grille is missing, gone like a rotted tooth. The flattened and shattered remnants of insects are pasted to the glass of the headlights. A stippled brown swoosh unfurls across the maroon hood, corrosion carving itself into the steel like a comet's tail against a dark sky. Through the driver-side window he sees the steering wheel, just like he imagined it. Worn maps, stained paper cups, empty soda cans pinched at their centers, and pens without caps litter the bench-like front seat. A hole has been melted into the surface of the plastic dash, probably with the lit end of a cigarette. What do these details add up to, if anything? As a teenager he spent a summer as a plumber's helper, riding around in the front seat of a van that looked just like this.

It's harder to see through the back windows, which he now realizes are lightly tinted. It's not a factory job, though—it looks as if someone simply painted the surface of the panes. Brushstrokes are visible, and there's about a quarter-inch of clear glass around the ragged perimeter. Sloppy work, but sufficient to keep someone like him from getting a good look at what lies within. The shadows, though, tell him what he already knows about the contents: clothing, newspapers, the clock radio. Junk.

He's about to head home when he sees something move. For a moment he thinks it's the reflection of a swaying branch or passing cloud. But no, he knows it's something inside. Painted glass or not, he's seen it, and even as he reassures himself it was not something outside the car that moved but something inside, he sees it again,

and he's sure of what it is now: a hand, extending toward the glass, the searching fingers flexed in a claw, as if preparing to seize on to whatever they find.

Well, he says to his wife on the phone. You're not going to believe this. He tells her about the grille, the insects on the headlights, the tinted glass, the stuff on the front seat. Finally, he mentions the hand.

So someone is living there. And you haven't called the police yet?

Yes, he lies. They came out but said there's no, how do they put it? Probable cause?

That you saw someone inside isn't probable cause?

They knocked on the windows, he says. They shouted, walked all around it, and there was nothing. Whoever it was might have taken off.

Or maybe he was just waiting you out. I can't believe this. I mean, does something bad have to happen first, before they do anything?

She sounds angry now, not afraid, like earlier, and he decides to pull back. Let me go out there again, he says. Maybe I can, I don't know. Make contact, or whatever.

Use your cell phone, she says. Take a picture. If you see him, take a picture.

I hadn't thought of that.

Well, that's why I'm suggesting it.

All right. I'll do that. I have to get the boys first, but I'll send them on inside and then try to find out what I can. Okay?

He hears her sigh over the phone, the sound traveling forty-some miles from her office out where the interstate splits. Someone says her name in the background, with the insistence he's heard in the voices of every middle manager he's ever known.

Do you have to go?

This bitch, she whispers. I swear to God I don't know how much more I can take. Anyway. She heaves a deep breath. I'm kind of busy, so, please—just see if you can make something happen, all right?

He looks out the window. The car is gone. Like a long-hanging picture removed from a wall, it seems to have left a scrim of dirt around the edges of the space it occupied.

I will, he says, hoping she doesn't hear the confusion he feels. I'll make something happen.

It's odd, he thinks to himself. It's more than odd. It's almost scary. There's no denying it. It's almost scary, the relief he experiences when he locates the car, when he finds that it's parked just around the corner. So it's not in front of their house anymore, but it's close enough, just one more house away, and still along the route he takes to and from the school.

Why does he feel this way? It's been two days since he first spotted it. The anxiety has given way to something else. Something like curiosity, but not just curiosity. He has an interest in it now, a stake. No one else has said anything about the car in the two days since it appeared, no one except for his wife, who doesn't seem compelled to stare out the window at it in the middle of the night like he does. To step up close and look inside like he does. To circle it, as if he's a prospective buyer ready to kick the tires, and not a concerned suburban father with entire days to fill before his wife gets home and he trades places with her behind the wheel of their own car, which he then drives down to the store so he can meet people when they come in and guide them along the endless aisles of goods they only think they need.

At this moment something sinks in his stomach: If the wagon remains parked where it is now, he won't be able to stare at it from the window tonight.

Returning from school, he tells his sons to go on ahead of him, that he'll meet them at home, that he just has to run a quick errand.

When you get in, he tells them, get a snack. Anything you can find in the fridge is fine.

Keys? The older one holds out his palm and waggles his fingers.

Oh yeah, almost forgot. He reaches into the pocket of his jacket and hands them over.

The younger one looks up at him. Can we play video games too?

Sure. Just don't mention it to your mother.

Obviously, he thinks, watching them go, obviously I should have told them to do their homework first. But they're both good boys; they'll get it done, even if it's tonight, after he's gone to work. He watches them down the street; they bang shoulders into each other, the kind of things boys heading home from school always do. Before they arrive at the front yard, he turns and rounds the corner of the street. It's waiting there—for him, he thinks; just for him, since none of the mothers or care-givers escorting their own charges home even slows to glance at it, nor do any of the children who make their way to and from the school by themselves, without adult accompaniment.

Hiding in plain sight—that's the phrase he's been searching for. The thing has been hiding in plain sight. Even if he had called the police, they might have taken down the details—the license plate, the make and model, how long it's been here on these streets—but they wouldn't have really cared. He knows that now; it's nothing that's going to be of any great concern to them as they troll the dense grid of suburban streets looking to spot crime in action. That's what they should really be doing, anyway; that's how their resources should be deployed. Spotting and stopping crime in action, not waiting for a rusted, decades-old station wagon to reveal something to them.

He saunters up to it; yes, saunters is the word, he thinks—no sense in looking suspicious, may as well walk right up to it like I'm in control, might as well *saunter*. He closes his fingers around the handle of the back door, the one behind the passenger seat door. A million memories come flooding in, though they're not really memories so much as feelings, or sensations, or just one giant collective sensation. How many times in his life did he hold just such a door handle? And there is the square knob, right beneath the pad of this thumb, where it's always been. For a long time, when he was

a kid, he had to use two hands to open doors that had this kind of handle. He had to use both thumbs to press the knob, two hands to pull back the door. Lax tone, a physical therapist had said to his mother, holding his weak hand in hers. Ordinary tasks will build the strength, she said; tying shoes, cutting food, that sort of thing.

He only needs one hand now, of course. The door is unlocked, just as he knew it would be. It swings open for him; he hardly has to pull at all.

God, she says, we didn't know what happened to you.

His wife is hurrying food to the table, where the two boys sit, looking up at him with puzzlement.

Why, she asks, why didn't you pick up your cell phone?

I was just running some errands, he answers. They didn't tell you? He casts a half-scolding glance at his boys. Besides, sometimes the voice mails don't come through until much later. Ah, he says, looking at the display. See? It just arrived.

Well, it's nothing anyway—just me wondering where you were.

He erases it without listening.

Anyway, she continues, sitting down. You should probably eat. You have to be at work soon.

Yes. He hangs the jacket on a hook by the door and pulls up a chair. I know.

His sons talks about something that happened at school; his wife takes a moment out of her careful, attentive listening to look at him curiously now and then, but soon seems to forget that anything is wrong. Not that anything is wrong anyway. He eats the food she's prepared, the reheated remains of what they've been eating all week. The kids chow down and scatter; he hears the TV come on in the other room. He is chewing the last of his food when she speaks.

Oh, she says. The car is gone! The old one out front, I mean. Thank God.

Yeah, he says; I know. Whoever it was probably had enough of these here parts. He says the last part with a cowboy accent; he doesn't know why.

Whatever, she laughs. By the way, there was a blue towel on the floor of the bathroom. Do you know where it came from?

The linen closet?

No, she says. I don't recognize it. Maybe one of the boys grabbed it at swimming lessons the other day.

That's probably it, he says, gathering his plate.

You better hurry. Traffic was pretty bad going the other way when I came home. Leave yourself extra time.

I will.

It is cool outside, the leaves thick and dark enough to consume the last of the day's light before it hits the ground. His feet are weightless on the grass as he crosses the lawn. Rounding the corner, he finds that it is still there.

Home, he thinks.

So he pulls open the door to the car and closes it behind him. He gets beneath the blankets and coats, slips inside the crackling embrace of yellowed newspaper. His head knocks into the clock radio, the one wrapped in its own cord. He shoves it away with the side of his hand. With the rear seat down, there's room to stretch. The items shift and resettle around him, like soil sifting through cracks. The car retains the day's warmth. He is in for the night, if not longer.

He burrows deeper, sinking into the accumulated layers. Home is here.

There is no reason to worry.