

'Zona

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My dad used to own a car dealership back in the day. I was never a "car guy" but I have found that cars sometimes become centrepieces for interesting stories. Like this weird tale for example....



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â Honey,â I called after stepping in the door, â Arizonaâ s sick.â

Linda responded to me from the kitchen. â Is she? Like sick how? Whatâ s the matter?â

I hung my jacket on the coat rack and made my way into the kitchen.

Linda had chicken pieces soaking in buttermilk and she was whisking together some flour and spices for my favorite dinner, fried chicken.

â Yum,â I said. â Mashed potatoes with that?â

She smiled the same beautiful smile I fell in love with ten years ago. â Fried chicken without mashed potatoes is like a Reeseâ s peanut butter cup with no peanuts.â

I pondered that one. *Yeah, guess so.*

â So tell me about Arizona. Whatâ s wrong?â

â Well,â I started, running a hand through my thinning brown hair, â I canâ t get her to go above 20 miles per hour. I got my foot on the gas, the engine is revving high and sheâ s puddling along as if itâ s breakneck speed. I got other drivers passing me and giving me the finger..itâ s embarrassing. I would have been home sooner, but it took me like an hour to get home.â

Linda put her hands on her hips as she thought. â Is she overheated?â

â Nah, not that I can tell. I didnâ t see any smoke and the temperature gauge looked fine.â

â This just started today?â

â Well, yes and no,â I said. â Today was certainly the worst, but over the last couple of weeks, I felt her almost *straining* to keep up a decent speed. Itâ s weird.â

Linda took out two dishes and placed them on the table. â Take her to see Deke. Heâ ll know what to do.â

She was right as always. Deke Simmons was one of the few mechanics in the small town of Sawmill, Arizona where we lived. He seemed to have an encyclopedic knowledge of auto mechanics and I knew he wouldnâ t screw me over like the guys would in the big city.

Arizona was the pet name I made for our 1998 Dodge Intrepid. I got her 5 years ago at Earnhardt Auto Dealerships in Phoenix and she only had 62,000 miles on the odometer at the time. Beautiful cherry red color, only a couple of quarter sized dings on the doors. My job as a pharmaceutical sales rep has me on the road a lot so in 5 short years, I nearly doubled the old galâ s mileage.

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Linda and I cannot have children for reasons I don't particularly wish to go into right now and we aren't exactly a pet people, so Zona was like the daughter we never had.

And now she was sick.

I enjoyed my fried chicken dinner with my wife and made a couple of calls to cancel some appointments I had slated for tomorrow to give me enough time to see Deke and get his initial opinion.

Just before bed, I looked out the window of our bedroom down to the driveway and saw Arizona, sitting there beside my wife's car, a 2009 navy blue Dodge Durango. We haven't named that one yet, but I'm thinking something like Butch.

Despite the dry Arizona heat, my baby did not overheat once and her engine purred every time I started her up. The air conditioning worked, Deke gave her the routine oil, lube and filters, never a problem. Even he was astounded by how she had held up over the years and miles on the road.

The following morning, I pulled up to Deke's Garage, about 15 miles from our street. Once again, Arizona turned over smooth as silk but when I put my foot on the gas, she would never go above 20 miles an hour and even then, it took her forever and a day to even reach that speed. I had the hazard lights blinking the entire way.

Deke was lying on his back working on the undersurface of a Ford Tempo on a hoist when I pulled up.

Arizona gave him a little honk and I saw him slide out from under the vehicle.

He was wearing denim overalls, smeared with grease and oil. He wore a baseball cap turned around backwards and his face broke out into a big grin when he saw us.

David. Arizona. Good to see ya all.

I shook his greasy hand and regretted it immediately afterwards. Yeah Deke, I wish it was good to see you too, but we got ourselves a sick puppy here.

He scratched his head over his cap. Zona, what's wrong with you girl?

She won't go over 20.

Deke let out something resembling a grunt and motioned for my keys. Let's pop the hood and give her a once over.

He slipped into the driver's door and pulled the latch for the hood to open with a resounding click.

Deke wiped his hands on his already soiled overalls and hunched over to better appraise Arizona's malady.

Let's see head oil gasket don't seem leaky no loose wires rad hose looks good no signs of overheating.

He walked around to the rear of the car and tried to pop the trunk. I heard him insert my key in and struggle somewhat.

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â Trunk wonâ t open neither.â

â What? Oh man,â I whined, â This just sucks the big one. I just got some boxes of drug samples I need to send to docs tomorrow and I need that trunk space!â

Deke said, â Tell ya what. As you can see I got some jobâ s pendinâ . Iâ ll drive yaâ ll home and you leave â Zona with me and Iâ ll work on her tonight and see if I canâ t get to the bottom of this and hopefully fix her.â

â Aw, thatâ s great Deke,â I said. â Linda will take me here tomorrow morning.â

With that, Deke drove me home in his Chevrolet Silverado pick-up, Hank Williams Jr.â s refrains emanating from the radio.

I lay in bed with Linda and my thoughts kept coming back to Arizona.

â Look, maybe Deke will fix the problem tonight. Maybe itâ s something small,â she reassured me.

â I donâ t know about that,â the pessimist in me proclaimed. â I can foresee this becoming one big hassle. I mean, if he needs her longer, that means I gotta work from home which most of the docs hate and then I gotta go shopping around for a new car or if she is fixable, what if I get reamed? The economy isnâ t that good now, you know.â

She smiled at me warmly. â Deke has never screwed you in the past and I certainly donâ t think heâ s going to start now. Have faith. When you drive Arizona home tomorrow, youâ ll realize how silly youâ re acting. As for work, take my car.â

â Oh yeah?â I snorted. â How are you going to clean peopleâ s teeth from home? What like floss over the phone? Gimme a break.â

She laughed. â Look, I got some sick days coming to me and I wouldnâ t mind the break either. Weâ ll just make it work out.â

I loved this woman so very muchâ ljust as much as I loved Arizona.

The following morning, Linda drove me to Dekeâ s and then hurried off to Dr. Filbertâ s office in the city. â Zona was outside on the gravel road that led to the proper garage. She stared at me with her headlights and she looked good to go. Or so I thought.

Deke stepped out of the darkened garage, a look of seriousness across his otherwise jovial face.

â Dave, this is weird,â he started. â I wanna show you some things.â He turned on the garage lights and popped her hood.

â I canâ t really find anything *wrong*. No corrosion, no faulty wiring, battery tested fine, but I do want you have a careful lookee here.â

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His finger swirled over the transmission. "Damndest thing I ever seen. These here parts are way bigger than they should be. She's swollen."

"Swollen?" I said. "Can metal swell?"

He shook his head. "Not in my world it can't so I thought maybe she was on the verge of overheating. I tried to put some coolant in her and.. he held up his right hand which was wrapped in gauze.

"What the hell?" I exclaimed.

Deke said, "She damn nearly burnt my fingers off. Temperature gauge says everything's okey dokey, so I almost get the feeling Zona here doesn't want anyone to put anything more in her. Trunk is a bust too. Can't get the dang thing opened. Not even a crack."

"What about gasoline?" I asked.

"Never tried. But be darn careful. Put on an oven mitt or somethin'."

"So..what do I do going forward?"

Deke seemed forlorn. "Beats the hell outta me. I mean you can leave her for a few more days and I can tinker around with her a bit."

"A few days? Shit Deke, that is seriously gonna screw up my work schedule."

He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, *what do you want from me?*

I got out my Blackberry and called for a cab.

That day I worked from home, trying my best to peddle Diclofenac, Pristiq and Cymbalta over the phone with doctors who seemed skeptical why I wasn't there in person to see my products firsthand.

Later that afternoon, Deke called me, a sense of panic in his voice.

"Dave, you better get your skinny ass down here pronto! This is like somethin' I ain't never seen before."

"I'm on my way."

One quick cab ride over to Deke's and there I was again, seeing Arizona sitting idle on the driveway. She looked different.

For one, the doors appeared to be bowed outward or warped, as if some insane pressure from inside was building up and was going to knock them right off their hinges. There was also a large puddle of fluid that had accumulated on her undersurface, seeping onto the gravel. On the plus side, there seemed to be some progress on the trunk. I could see it was now slightly ajar, one and a half inches at most, staying in that position. Was it again a consequence of the building pressure inside her or did Deke's tinkering actually make some headway?

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He shuffled out of the garage, wearing a different cap that read "CAT Power" on it with faded blue jeans and a plain dark green T-shirt.

"Ah, you're here. Good stuff. Get a load of this," he gestured to the fluid on the ground.

"What is it?" I asked. "Gas, oil? Antifreeze?"

Deke knelt down and with his index finger, scooped up some of the fluid and licked it from his fingertip.
"Nope. Plain old water."

"Water?" I exclaimed. "So...it's the water pump blown."

"Damn nearly *exploded* is a better word," Deke commented. "Here, lemme show ya somethin' else."

He handed me a flashlight from the garage. "Peek into the trunk, but be careful, don't try to open any further than it is. She don't like that and she'll burn ya."

I turned on the flashlight and peered, dreading a fear of the unknown.

Through the small opening, I could make out four small tires. It was hard to see from this vantage point, but I certainly did not recall putting any spares in her trunk.

I looked befuddled.

"Dontcha see?" Deke said. "Arizona is *pregnant*!"

"She's a 'she' s what? Deke, that's insane."

He nodded in agreement. "From my mouth to God's ears is what it is. Her water done broke and she's ready to deliver! No wonder she couldn't go fast for ya! Poor girl is exhausted."

My God! I ran my hand gently down her hood. She seemed to like it as I didn't not detect any signs of acute inflammation coming forth. The poor girl was swollen to capacity and the little Tonka or whatever the hell it was certainly seemed ready to come into the world, very, very soon.

"Who do you suspect the father is?" Deke asked.

I threw my hands in the air. "Hell, I don't know! This whole thing is just nuts! I mean '! *Butch*. That old sonofagun. Those long nights, sitting side by side in the driveway..Almost intimate moments.

Deke scratched his head. "Could be just 'bout anyone right? I mean, you drive around a lot for work, dontcha? Tons of parking lots, grocery stores 'la

"Are you implying she sleeps around?" I said, angry.

Deke held up his hands in surrender. "I ain't sayin' nothin' of the sort. Just thinking aloud is all." He paused for a moment. "I wonder how they 'ya know 'ldo it."

"No clue," I said, rubbing my hand along my chin. "Maybe the male car puts his dipstick in the tailpipe somehow 'maybe some fluid squirts out of the windshield wiper onto the female car.."

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Deke laughed and slapped his right knee. "Hot damn you're funny! Listen old friend, leave her with me. I don't know how long this is gonna take, but she is safe here. I got the equipment and tools to help her with her delivery or what have ya. And when junior is born, I'll give you a ring."

I smiled and shook his hand.

I drove Linda's SUV Butch for a few days just to appease my medical clients while she stayed at home. I had come home from work one day and was sitting down for dinner with Linda when the phone rang.

"Congratulations," Deke said. "It's a girl! I dunno what it is, but it's here!"

Linda and I zoomed over to Deke's in Butch, Linda driving.

When we pulled onto Deke's lot, Arizona's trunk was now fully open, the doors were no longer bowed and Deke had her engine purring like she was brand new. She seemed *happy*.

"Yup, woke up this morning and the trunk was wide open. I hosed her down every day which I think she liked. Replaced her water pump too," he said after giving Linda a peck on the cheek.

Linda asked, "Where is the..youngster?"

Deke gestured behind him. "In the garage, I gave it a quick wash and topped up its motor oil. I think it wants to nap a while."

I stepped into the garage and saw a tiny version of a blue SUV, about three feet long, 2 feet tall, looking a lot like Butch, but with Arizona's headlights. It was beautiful, not a scratch on it with the energy of a car that had never driven a mile but was dying to do so.

Deke and I carefully lifted the little tyke and placed him into Arizona's trunk. It closed without a hitch, pardon the pun. I asked Deke how much he wanted for all this and he just grinned and said not to worry, it was his pleasure, just pay for his supplies which I gladly did.

Linda drove Butch home that day which she described as "having a new fervor."

"Zona easily did 50 miles per hour with me behind the wheel, a new and vibrant energy pulsating through her."

So now, we are a family..of sorts. Linda and I now have the responsibility of maintaining three cars and it will be a most interesting ride seeing our latest addition grow and prosper. We have named him "Duke" as "Deke" was already taken.

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