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Your Family's Never in the Past

by Victoria Watson

Donald drives around in Tony's car. He hates it; the beast is falling to pieces. That's what he calls it, "The Beast". He has to drive "The Beast" to work and back, up a long and bumpy track that makes him roll about the seat, his stomach plummeting as it hits the bottom of a pot hole and then lurches forward as he jolts over the next bump. That track is over two miles long, is one car wide and can wake a sleeping baby, break a dozen eggs and has caused Donald more cancelled appointments than anything else.

When you next walk out your front door, car keys jangling in your hand, think about poor Donald as you whistle a chirpy tune and beep beep the alarm on your car, throwing yourself in and setting off in a jiffy.

Donald might whistle a chirpy tune as he sets off, but that tune soon shifts, soon dissolves into the morning air as his breath clouds before his face in the chilly silence. That tune vaporises from Donald, along with his good mood as his car's suspension groans like an old dog having to stretch from a nap. The car lilt and wades its way pathetically along the rambling, insufferable stretch of road, hobbling on until at last like a massive belch he is expelled onto a tarmac road, with lines on, cats' eyes on and a surface that does not resemble the moon.

The problem is that the Beast is Tony's and when Tony drove it, it was pristine. Every button clicked, each wiper a graceful stroke, the paintwork shone, the chrome gleamed and the car started with an eager rev that reassured Tony that he and the car were in their prime of life. The immaculate seats embraced you as you sat down, the seatbelt clunk clicking by your hip with as much finality as a full stop. This car was solid, was safe and it was going to get you from A to B without fuss, without falter, but with determination and confidence. This car had you. This car had your back, front and your 2.5 children and golden retriever. This car was Tony's pride and joy.

Then Donald drove it.

Donald who forgets dental appointments, but then remembers and squirms his way into the dentist's chair with oily excuses and sad stories. Donald who is always late, never has enough cash to pay his round, and has to rush off anyway because he has no food in the house and his elderly mother has gone into a nursing home. Donald who promises to look after your cat but forgets to buy any cat food and gives it baked beans. Donald who always apologises with baleful puppy eyes each and every time he scratches your CDs or breaks your book spines. Donald who offers to make you a cup of tea but never has any tea bags. Donald who will pay you back that money, but did you know his sister is diabetic and he's done his back in again.

Donald is a loser. There is no point in pretending otherwise and you wish you could but when Tony went to Australia to visit his new granddaughter, Tony pretended by giving Donald his car keys to keep safe. Tony naively thought that by giving the keys to his younger brother it would be safer than locking it up in his burglar-alarmed garage. Tony had no idea that Donald would total his own car a week after Tony left for his 3-month vacation. He would never have thought that Donald thinks car insurance is a choice, like an MOT is a special extra. He would also never realise that you could fit two bags of cement, a roll of fencing wire, sixteen bags of frozen sausages and a dozen battery hens in the back of his pristine car.

Tony comes back from holiday tomorrow. He has had a wonderful time bonding with little Sally, she is the spit of his daughter and has the same determined chin as her grandfather. Donald eyes Tony's car sagging low over the back wheels, like an elephant sitting down on its haunches. Tony sees the straw strewn around the inside of the car like someone has been making scarecrows in it. He slides his fingers along the dent that runs along the driver's door, the passenger's door, the wheel arch and across the bonnet where that big piece of drain pipe would just not fit in. He notes the broken head lamp and mirrors the wink back at the car, hoping that Tony might have a bit of sun stroke when he gets off the plane tomorrow and not notice. He wonders if he will really see the bent aerial, the crack in the windscreen or the tomato soup stains on the seat, with 24-hour jet lag.

Deep, deep down, Tony knows he will notice all of these things, but has no idea what to do about it. Should he come clean to Tony, and explain how life has kicked him well and truly this time and he had no choice if he didn't want to lose his job? Surely Tony would understand, he would get it, help out his kid brother, his old pal who went way back. Tony would get it, right?

Donald scratches his two-day beard and wonders if he should just drive it into a ditch somewhere, throw the keys into a lake and hitch home. With the car stolen, Tony would be devastated but at least there would be the insurance claim. Tony could get a new car, it could be better than this one and Donald would basically be doing Tony a favour, albeit one he could not boast about. He would be giving him a brand-new car. A generous act, a thoughtful thing, a loving deed. Tony would be thrilled.

Donald kicks a tyre and the chrome hub falls off voluntarily and rolls away between the dustbins. Donald watches with curiosity as the wheel rolls round and round faster and faster in the same spot, the noise rising with each perfect roll like a roulette wheel. He is transfixed, unable to move any of his sorry bones, unable to move his mesmerised eyes away from the rotating wheel, then it crashes down with a deafening finale and Donald turns back to the Beast.

What would you do?