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Night of Sighs

by William S. Warner
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Everyday life is anchored in trust. We trust the alarm will awake us, the car will start, the wife won't run off with another woman.... But we're held afloat by the untrustworthy, from public figures to private institutions. We can't even bank on the bank these days. I don't even trust my own mind to remember another pin code or where the flashlights are, much less trust they work. Maybe I was wrong: life is anchored in distrust, but buoyed by trust.

Since Adam and Eve, man has faced the question of trusting the untrustworthy. Today's serpents aren't just used-car salesmen and retread driveway pavers who just happen to be in your neighborhood with some extra asphalt. They include overdrive telemarketers, supercharged politicians, fuel-injected athletes... all topping our tanks with high-octane skepticism. If you've become skeptical about low-grade people, let me tell you a premium story about trust.

Once upon a time (last summer) my wife, mother-in-law and I drove to Oslo to hear a string quartet play chamber music in the chapel of a 17th century fortress. It was a dreamy respite from the automotive age, the music drifting one's mind back to a gilded time of formal elegance and flourishing art. It was the prelude to a night of sighs.

We parked the car on a road skirting the fortress, a dark moat-like avenue walled by mossy stone and iron gates, with ceremonial

soldiers standing sentry above and hookers standing akimbo below. As we pulled in to park, I noticed a prostitute leaning against the car next to us, her heel hooked on the bumper. She did not appear as you might imagine. With the exception of the classic thigh-length boots accenting her long legs, she looked quite normal – no flashy clothes, no painted face. Her expression was neither dull nor pained. If anything, she seemed anxious, glancing at her watch. It was the first time I'd seen a streetwalker up close. She was small-boned, with long frizzy hair the color of ginger, a sweet-faced young thing with a hint of Putin-like eyes. She could have been a ballerina with the Bolshoi and maybe she had been, but for one reason or another had traded her satin slippers for stiletto heels. There was something tragic about her, like a ballerina with a twisted ankle or a bird with a broken wing – in the gutter. Perhaps that's why Victorians called them *soiled doves*.

After locking the car we crossed the street and passed through an iron gate, one of those towering Victorian relics. I took note that the gate closed at nine o'clock and wondered how we'd get back to the car. Flagstone steps led us to a wooden footbridge that crossed over the road. As we shuffled across – my mother-in-law was running on three cylinders, pausing frequently – I held her elbow and surveyed the vehicular moat. With the gate locked, the only way back would be a long, grueling trek.

From my bird's-eye view I also spotted the scattered flock of doves; and although it was only dusk, the wolves were already prowling in their sleek cars. What a contrast to the elevated gentle folk, strolling across the bridge to high-brow music. In front, a soldier standing straight as a lamppost ignored blinking cameras, while just a pebble toss below, a woman leaning against a lamppost ignored blazing headlights. The frozen figures probably had different thoughts that night, but I'm sure they wheezed identical sighs of boredom.

After the concert, we walked with others to the gate. I was hoping for the best, but not planning for the worst. Locked! You can imagine the sigh I moaned. As we turned back, two soldiers – not in dress uniforms with plumed hats and shiny buttons but in drab fatigues with slung rifles and crackling radios – met us and said they had the key. Another sigh followed, one of liberation and relief.

As we crossed the street, I was surprised to see the same dove still at her perch next to our car. (I avoid the term *streetwalker* because it's a misnomer: they're rather stationary.) She was accompanied by another young woman of similar normal appearance, save the thigh-length boots. Between them, a take-out coffee sat on the car trunk. One fiddled with an umbrella; the other talked on a cell phone in an agitated voice. When it comes to languages best suited for agitation, Russian even trumps Arabic. I pulled out the car keys with a deliberate rattle, and they moved a few cars away with smiles of courtesy, not sneers of contempt.

It began to drizzle ever so lightly. Our car doors yawned; their umbrellas blossomed. We got in and buckled up just as pearls of water beaded on the windshield. "Just in time," I said with a sigh of relief, "We're lucky!"

But we weren't. The car wouldn't start. My head dropped, and the pendulum of sighs swung the other way, like an executioner's axe.

It wasn't the first time it had happened but

more like the fourth. The engine would fire up and suddenly stop, sort of like an Olympic sprinter tripping once he left the block. Then after a few minutes – or a few days! – it would unexpectedly come out of its coma and run fine for a few months. The reason I didn't get it fixed was because the garage mechanic said it was probably electrical: "Might take a couple of hours to fix," then with a shrug, "... or a couple of days." That's garage-speak for, "You'll probably need a home equity loan."

Anyway, after a few minutes of trying to start it, the dove came up and tapped on the window. She was smiling, with arms crossed as if to ward off a chill. In faltering English, stumbling for the words, she said that her friend had the same kind of car, with the same kind of problem, and she could maybe help us. I was slow and speechless; my wife was swift and polite: "Thank you, but we've got it under control."

Of course we didn't. After several more attempts I suggested that my wife call a cab, take my mother-in-law home and then return with her father's car. Before she could use her cell phone, we spotted a taxi and flagged it down. What luck – just like the soldiers with the gate key. The pendulum of sighs swung up again.

As soon as they left I became acutely aware of their absence – more specifically, of my solitude. The sensation of being a lost soul was overwhelming. I wasn't fearful, but my mind was racing like a pinball machine. Aside from the car problem was the problem of me sitting alone in the red-light district, slumping in the seat like a crab trying to hide under a rock. (Note: Oslo cops don't arrest prostitutes, rather their clientele.)

When it stopped drizzling, I hopped out of the car, raised the hood and acted like I was doing something. Key word: acted – an ability on par with my mechanical skills. I jiggled wires, tapped hoses, checked the washer fluid... then tried starting the engine, over and over and over.

Finally, I thought, what the heck? I walked over to the doves and cleared my throat,

"Excuse me. How did you get your car started?" They sensed I was anxious in approaching them, and tried to put me at ease with sympathetic smiles. I was surprised at how responsive they were; they walked immediately to the car. Only the ginger-haired ballerina could speak English: "My friend she says she wants to try." She did not ask for the keys, but it was obvious – I mean how else could one start a car? I hesitated, "Uh, well... I'm not supposed to let anyone into the car." It sounded child-like and lame, even to me; so I rebounded with a monumentally dumb alternative: "Maybe she could just *tell* me." They gesticulated in Russian, with rolled eyes and waving hands. I have no idea what they said but I assume it was something like, "Are all Americans this stupid?" "They reelected Bush!"

The scene seems comical now, but at the time it wasn't. I was afraid my thinking, my judgment, was now in error. There I was, standing next to two prostitutes, negotiating with one while the other was trying to get in my car. Slow-moving cars cruised by, staring. I was sure one would stop with a single burp of a siren, blue lights pulsing. Two cops would slide out of their cruiser (and nightsticks in their belt rings), and I'd stammer, "You see, officer, my car wouldn't start, and these ladies offered to help..." "Right, Mr. President. You have the right to remain silent...." Even my wife wouldn't believe me, much less my mother-in-law.

So, I tried to back out of the negotiation. The dove smiled and said, quite earnestly, "We do not cause problem, really." I deliberated for a moment, then sighed defeat and surrendered the keys, figuring that if she did get the car started, she wasn't going to drive off – at least not far. The hood was up.

She sincerely tried to start the car, pumping the gas with surgical precision, cocking her head as if listening for something other than the engine's tubercular cough. After several attempts she smiled with resignation and swung out of the car seat.

As they walked away, I thanked them,

again. They smiled over their shoulders and perched a few cars away, with boot heels hooked on bumpers. One thumbed her cell phone; the other sipped tepid coffee. Both seemed as deserted as I was.

I felt... I don't know... sorry for them. They seemed like genuinely nice people stuck in a genuinely terrible life. So, I called over, "You're very thoughtful – and I'm very grateful." The ginger-haired girl tossed a nodding smile and then it was back to work. Professional passion came with a price tag; basic compassion was free.

I slid into the car and slumped in the seat, with eyes fixed on the rearview mirror. Cars cruised by like prowling sharks, predators in broad streetlight. The furrow in my brow deepened. A ringer for creepy footage from *Taxi Driver*, it gave me the first helpful hint as to what life was for Travis. My stare was broken by shifting shadows in front: bottom-feeders stalking the sidewalks glaring at the doves. Before this moment, these street people were nothing more than fingerprints on amber bottles, smudges on bus windows. Now they came alive, some scuttling crab-like, others were slipping in and out of the shadows like hyenas, skittish as a dog whipped a thousand times.

Occasionally I'd try to start the car, as if the noise alone might spook away the shoulder-hunched men, hands stuffed deep in their pockets, clutching who knows what. Suddenly one passerby slackened his pace, as if the whining ignition had called the scavenger to a wounded animal. I turned the key hard: a hacking cough followed by grating ignition, then silence. He stopped right in front of the car and said something. Uh-oh. As I mentioned, my acting ability is limited, and I knew if I were to play DeNiro and come out verbally swinging like Travis, "You talking to *me*?" it would have been what Elvis movies are to Elvis music. Instead, with chipmunk timidity I squeaked, "What?"

I was taken back when he asked what the problem was, which seemed quite obvious. But there was something in his manner and

tone that seemed to be of sincere interest. So I told him the obvious. With implausible reflex he poked his head under the hood and took the liberty of checking wires, not curious-like, rather, with straightforward authority. He looked up and said, "Prov igen (Try again)." I did; nothing happened.

I got out, and as I walked around the car he reached in his pocket. His face screwed up one of those coy grins that said, Look what I've got! I was expecting a snub-nose .38 or a Bowie knife; he pulled out a hefty set of keys. He used one to pry off the distributor cap, pulled out a bowtie-shaped spindle, gave it a quick squint, then scraped it on the sidewalk, and set all back in place: "Try again!" Again, nothing happened. But there was something different about his voice.

I got out and craned my neck over his bent back. As his hands poked deeper in the engine, and mine deeper in my pockets, I asked, "Er du Svenske?" (You're Swedish?) He answered, "Ja." I asked a half-dozen questions and got four "Ja's" and two "Nea's", without him raising his head once. That was the extent of our midnight chat other than "Prov igen," which had me hopping in and out of the car several times. He just seemed like a Good Samaritan who had nothing better to do than scrape knuckles on a stranger's car. I was totally baffled.

Once when I was behind the wheel, and he was over the engine, another fellow saddled up, "What's wrong?" He wasn't asking me but the Samaritan. The guy spoke Norwegian and looked like an Olympian athlete after a night of rye and Lucky Strikes. He resembled Mike Phelps, half man, half osprey, with a wingspan three inches greater than his height. The next thing I knew he was sitting side-saddle on the radiator, like a pool shark mounting a billiard table for a long shot, one hand directing his cell phone's blue glow, the other stretching across the engine, apparently mining for something or going for the 8-ball in a far corner. Then he called out in Norwegian: "Try the ignition, but NO gas." It started for a half-second and then stopped

with an ominous click.

They talked over the problem, so I got out and ambled over, but it was as if I were interrupting their problem-solving conversation over *their* problem-making car. During a pregnant pause I said to the Swede, "Seems like you're a mechanic."

"We both are. Work together, for..." and he pointed to the VW logo on the grill. I stood there like a deer caught in the headlights of an oncoming car that had suddenly braked. I don't which was greater, my shock or relief.

They concluded the problem was probably a bug in the engine's computer. In *short*, an electrical problem (pun intended).

The Swede said, "They'll probably replace the whole data box."

The Norwegian said matter-of-factly (as only a true mechanic speaks), "That'll cost about 15,000 kroner (\$3000)."

My response sounded like a blow-out: "What!?" Then my voice went flat, "The car's not worth that much."

He nodded. Then he flexed that classic mechanic's shrug, "Eight, maybe ten thousand."

Up against the wall, I asked them what I should do. The Swede said I should just leave it there, put a note on the window and pick it up in the morning. His partner said the police would tow it anyway: "Happened to a friend last week," he said. I'd noticed the van parked next to me had a weathered note plastered on the windshield saying it wouldn't start, and it was still there. The plates, however, were gone.

But the Norwegian also said he had a friend who could tow it to a garage for me. "Which is where?" I asked. He tossed his head phlegmatically: "In town."

The Swede said he had to go, so I shook his grimy hand and said thanks. He merely nodded, "No problem."

The Norwegian and I just stood there, staring at the engine; total silence, save the serpent hiss of tires on wet pavement and the inner voice of our thoughts. But they weren't the same thoughts. It never crossed my mind

that I was being set up. You might say it was obvious; as obvious as asking a stranger trying to start his car, "What's wrong?" Considering I'd just had my email accounted hacked, you'd think I'd have been more cautious about having my car highjacked. Well, I wasn't. My mind was just spinning.

So was the Norwegian's. He broke the spell of silence: "I've got a flashlight and some tools in my car." And off he walked – down the shadowed sidewalk and into the inky tunnel under the bridge. That took nerve. I craned my neck for a while then gave up, totally flummoxed. I glanced around – at the prowling cars, the street people muttering to themselves, the two doves stranded in the gutter, like me – thoughts tumbling....

Suddenly a pair of headlights swung up and out he swung, a beaming flashlight in one hand, a small screwdriver in the other. Before I could say, "What're you going to..." he had the distributor cap off and was looking at it really closely. He scraped out corroded grit, snapped it back on; then he leaned deep inside, one leg in the air like a diver's plunge. He held that pose for the length of the Bible, while knuckles scraped and screwdriver rattled. Then, without moving, he commanded from the sepulchral darkness, "Ignition, no gas." It was like Jesus commanding, "Lazarus, come out." Different order but same result. The engine roared to life!

We don't know what Lazarus did after resurrecting, but I sprang out of the car, went right up to him, got down on my knees and bowed to his feet. Then I stood up and put a hand on his shoulder, "You are an angel." He didn't crack a smile at my genuflection but merely said, "It's that (pointing at the distributor). A new one will cost about 500 kroner." I gushed thanks while reaching for my wallet. All I had was a 200-kroner bill (about \$40), which is a third of the hourly rate at a garage. I whole-heartedly offered it. And

he whole-heartedly took it.

It gets stranger. He asked if I had far to drive, because he said I shouldn't turn it off before I got home, even to get gas. When I said about 30 kilometer, that I lived in Ås, he said he could come to the house some day and put on a new distributor cap. I was shocked by his altruism: "Where do you live?"

"Oslo," he said, "but my girlfriend lives in Ås."

"You're kidding, where?"

"On Sagaveien."

You could have knocked me over with an angel's feather. "That's my street!" I gave him my card, and he looked at it with curious detachment. I thanked him for the umpteenth time and he casually sighed, "Happens all the time." Then he drove off. As soon as his tail lights zippered in with the traffic, my wife showed up. "Kirsti," I said, "you're not going to believe this."

The night of sighs was as much about learning as luck. I learned a lot about my smug judgment – that those who might hurt can help, that those who sell themselves also give freely. And that misfortune sometimes turns into treasure by trusting those we don't. That might be luck, but when it happens, it resurrects you as much as them. And that's not luck; it's grace.

Someone once said, "When you think the world is rotten, remember all the kind people you've met." That tender truth is manifested when those kind people are strangers, and magnified when you remember them standing by the most unlikely gates of heaven, those barriers we fix on the side streets of hell, where prostitutes come freely as doves of peace and bottom feeders ascend as angels. Their unsolicited kindness made a dark hour let me see them in their shining light. The memory alone still makes me sigh.

J. Hill Hamon, AAPA member from Frankfort, KY