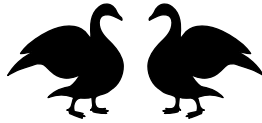


PARTS AND LABOR



“Would you like something while you’re waiting?” the man behind the counter asks Joanie.

“No, thanks.”

She lowers her gaze. On the counter in front of her is a stack of free wall calendars: *Happy Holidays from Mike’s Tire Shop!* She fingers the thick paper cover of the one on top and begins to turn it over, expecting to see a something from scenic America—the Grand Tetons, Natural Bridges, or autumn in Vermont—but then thinks, since this is a tire shop, it more likely she will see a shiny race car with a big front end pictured instead. Of course, she knows that what is even more probable than this, is that the calendar will feature large round breasts beneath a beaming blond smile, but when the cover of the calendar is finally flipped back, she sees that the pin-up for the month of January is a pork butt.

Joanie lifts this page, deciding to look ahead through the year. February features a rump roast, and each following month showcases another cut of meat in full, rich color. March is tripe; April, a boiled tongue. Joanie is looking for a t-bone. She and Gary, since they are intellectuals, had been vegetarians until quite recently, but Joanie has developed a taste for steak in the past year, ever since she discovered Gary’s affair.

Joanie is angry that almost everything, even this tripe, reminds her that her husband has been unfaithful. But why is she still holding on to her hurt? The affair was over more than a year ago. Why can’t it simply sink into the past? Why can’t it simply disappear from the record? Gary swore up and down the woman meant nothing to him. It was just a mid-life crisis, he explained, a fever

that passed, a virus that had to run its course. He cringes with embarrassment when he thinks of it, he tells her. It was so ordinary, so common, so stupid. He wants to put it behind them. Joanie has told him that she forgives him, that she understands. But she doesn't really forgive him, and she doesn't really understand. She wants it to simply go away.

A little while ago she was on her way to work, innocently trying to imagine what awaited her at the office and trying not to imagine some lurid scene in a motel room involving Gary and a woman whose face was a blur but whose body parts were not, when she realized that the annoying bumping sound she had been hearing for several blocks was being made by her own vehicle. She continued driving to see what would happen. The noise persisted.

She pulled over to the curb, unsure what to do. Her reflex was to call Gary, but, she realized, she was only a few blocks from the dealership where she had the car serviced. She could just drive over there, and maybe they could check it out on the spot.

When she got there, she found there were several other cars ahead of her, parked in the service entrance, and she waited her turn. Finally, one of the mechanics came up and asked her if she had an appointment. He was young, slim, polite, and utterly uninterested in her.

"No, I don't have an appointment," she admitted, "but my car's making a noise, and I was wondering if someone could just take a quick look at it to see if it's anything serious."

"If you wait a few minutes, I'll see if I can get someone to check it out," the mechanic said. "Just park, and I'll get someone to come out as soon as I can. We're a little backed up today."

As Joanie waited out on the street, she watched as other people, people with appointments, drove in and out and got serviced right away. It was a dreary, overcast morning. The fog was so thick she couldn't see to the end of the street. She comforted herself with thinking that at least she was trying to do something about her problem. Trying to ignore it hadn't made it go away. And she felt glad that she hadn't bothered Gary. He wouldn't have to know anything about it. Yet it seemed to her that she was waiting an inordinately long time. There was a good chance, she knew, that she'd been totally forgotten.

Then finally the same mechanic appeared, the polite young man. She gave him the key so he could take her around the block and she could show him what she was talking about. "I think it's something in the rear end," she told him, and

she felt her face flush.

He pulled back to the curb in front of the dealership, got out of the car, bent down, and began to examine the right rear wheel. "There's a nail in your tire," he said.

She suddenly remembered that the last time she'd had the car serviced they told her she should replace two of the tires, but she hadn't gotten around to it. Had she brought this trouble on herself?

"We don't repair tires," the mechanic informed her. "Go to Mike's, Mike's Tire Shop. It's only a few blocks away, on Geary at Twelfth—between Twelfth and Funston." He was through with her.

As Joanie drove the few blocks to Mike's, the tire bumping regularly, she decided that she might as well buy the tires she needed while she was there, though she didn't know anything about buying tires or how much tires cost, and again she considered calling Gary. But she doubted Gary knew any more about buying tires than she did, and somehow she wasn't eager for him to know that she wasn't on her way to work anymore, that she was no longer where he thought she was.

When she got to the tire shop, she found that its driveway was clogged, too, clogged with cars being worked on, cars whose owners probably had appointments. She was wondering if she should find a space on the street when a man got up from under a car parked in a bay and motioned her forward.

"How can I help you?" he asked her when she had powered down her window. He seemed genuinely interested. "I think I have a nail in my tire," she said.

"Let's just take a look." He opened the door for her, and she climbed out and led him around to the rear of the car. "Yep, it looks like a nail," he said, "but we can take it out and patch it up for you. We can make it just like new. Better than new."

He looked to be in his mid-forties, maybe just a bit younger than she was. Joanie examined his arms as he examined the tire. His skin was as smooth as if it had been rubbed with olive oil; his eyes, when he raised his head and smiled at her, were warm, dark, and moist. His lips were full and red; his belly pushed against his blue shirt.

She looked away. "Can you do it now? I need to go to work."

"No problem," he said.

That was when Joanie realized that nobody ever came here with an appointment. Nobody ever planned to have a flat tire. It was just something that happened to you, something that could happen to anybody at any time. It was

nothing to feel ashamed about. And this lovely man was prepared to take care of her right away. It was too good to be true, no matter what it would turn out to cost.

“The last time I got the car serviced, they told me I needed some new tires. Do you think that I do?” she asked.

He walked around the car, inspecting each of the tires carefully.

“I think your tires have several more months wear in them,” he said. “I wouldn’t get any new tires yet.”

“Really?” she said, delighted. He could have sold her new tires that she didn’t need, but he hadn’t done it. Apparently there still were decent, honest men in the world.

“I’ll just patch this one. It won’t take long,” he said, already starting to jack up her car. He had rolled a red machine over while they were talking, and now he placed it under the chassis and started pumping the handle, his bicep bulging. She watched in fascination as her car lifted off the ground as if it were filled with helium. Then he took another tool and placed it over each of the rivets to remove them. The sound of the rivets quickly becoming unscrewed was oddly satisfying to Joanie. The tire man worked gracefully and efficiently and didn’t make her feel like she was in the way. She wasn’t bothering him; he might even be enjoying having her there. The hubcap came off and then the tire, and then he was rolling it across the floor and placing it on its side on top of another gizmo. Joanie followed after him. Stacked up on the walls all around them were more tires—new tires, thick with tread, promising safe rides wherever one wanted to go.

“Here’s your problem,” he said, holding up a screw.

It was a big one.

“It will be just a few minutes. You can wait in the office if you like,” he said, gesturing with his head toward the interior of the shop.

The office was paneled with a dark wood-like veneer and had no windows. Posters of race cars were displayed on the wall behind the counter, and on the opposite counter was the pile of calendars as well as a stack of magazines. Another tire man was in there, tapping numbers into a calculator. He offered her coffee, but she refused. Then, after flipping through a calendar and failing to find a steak, Joanie pulled a body-building magazine out of the pile and opened it.

It was astonishing to her to see what shapes a human body could take—how

small the waists, how big and hard the arms of both men and women. After Joanie had learned about Gary's affair, she had started doing a little weight lifting herself, and she loved how it had started to give her muscles definition and she loved feeling ready to punch out the woman Gary had had the affair with, should she ever meet her, which wasn't especially likely. Which was just as well, Joanie thought, since as it turned out, the woman was a high school gym teacher and might have a lot more definition than Joanie, despite all her efforts.

Joanie put the magazine back on the shelf, next to the cardboard display erected there requesting donations for a Catholic orphanage. Slots in the display were provided for coins. It was decorated with bunnies and ducks, and in the center, in fancy script, was the Twenty-third Psalm—"Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me . . ."

"Would you like me to write it up for you now?" the tire man asked her.

"That would be fine," Joanie said.

"Name?" the tire man asked. "Your first name is all I need."

"Joan," Joanie said, then, "Do you have . . . could I use your . . ." She hesitated, not sure how she should phrase her request.

"It's in the back of the shop," he said, gesturing in that direction. "Go right ahead."

So Joanie began to thread her way through the narrow aisles of tires piled to the ceiling. Many were labeled "Michelin," reminding her of the *Guide Michelin* she had used one summer traveling around France with a girlfriend, how it had shown them all the wonderful places where they couldn't afford to stay or eat, but they didn't care, they were young; they weren't interested in luxury then, only romance. But that was a long time ago. Finally, in the very back of the shop she found a door with silhouettes of a man and a woman—holding hands. She pushed on it, and it swung open.

Inside was a room that looked like any moderately priced motel room. The carpet was beige, and green patterned drapes covered the windows. An armoire held a TV, and there was a small table with easy chairs on either side upholstered to match the drapes. In a frame on the wall was a painting of a woman with her hands in a muff. There was a small desk with a lamp, stationery, and plastic cards listing amenities that were offered and rules that were to be followed. On one of the bedside tables was a digital clock, its red numbers illuminated, and on the other, a phone.

Sitting on the bed was a man.

There was nothing remarkable about him. His lank hair, a medium brown,

was somewhat thin and combed across his forehead. He wore glasses, which were probably bifocals, Joanie thought. His skin looked dry, though more or less unlined; his eyes were some pale color. He was wearing a short-sleeved, plaid, button-down shirt, khaki pants, and loafers. Gary never wore plaid, and he detested loafers. The man had what seemed to Joanie to be a medium build, and he seemed to be about medium height, though Joanie couldn't say for sure since he was sitting down. There was something about the way his shoulders sat over his chest that seemed slack and flaccid to her. Still, he didn't seem like a bad person.

She sat down next to him on the bed.

The mattress felt too soft. How many people had slept on it, she wondered. How many had made love on it? Was it in a motel room just like this one where Gary had labored lasciviously with the gym teacher? Joanie tried once again to block that picture from her mind. It had not meant anything, Gary had insisted, but how could it not have meant anything? The man next to her on the bed took off his shirt, re-buttoned every other button, folded it neatly, and placed it on one of the upholstered easy chairs. To do this, he had to stand up, so Joanie could see that he was actually a little taller than average. Very tall men scared her, but he wasn't that tall, just a bit taller than average, and he only scared her a little.

When she had first discovered Gary's affair, Joanie had naturally thought about sleeping with someone else herself, so she could get revenge, so she could make herself just as bad as Gary and stop being morally superior, so they could be on an equal footing again, so she could make Gary jealous, and so she could prove to herself that she was still an attractive woman. And she might have done so, but it was just about impossible for Joanie to dredge up any interest in anyone else.

Yet Gary had dredged up interest in the gym teacher. He had more capacity for dredging up interest in other people than she did. She felt a loaf of anger pushing down heavily on her heart as she watched the man walking back to her from the upholstered chair where he had left his neatly folded shirt. His wife had trained him very well; he knew how to avoid getting his shirt tangled in a knot.

He had a little flab hanging over his belt. Well, who didn't by this age. Gary certainly had a little, but it wasn't flaccid like this man's; it was firm to the touch; it was endearing. But surely the bulge which hung over this man's belt endeared him to his wife, too: his wife with whom he had a whole history of memories, of things they had gone through together.

Like how she had gotten pregnant with their first child in the backseat of the limo on the way to their high school prom. How after their second son was born and they were pregnant with their third, he had realized he needed to get serious about a career and how the little one developed asthma, and the older one was very slow to learn to read, and the middle one was always crying; and how he had gotten a little job with a little firm and how stifled he had felt in this little job and how eventually he had taken a bigger job and how hard he had worked at his big job, so hard his back kept going out; and how his older son got into drugs, and the middle one tried to commit suicide, and the little one kept having to be hospitalized with asthma attacks; and what a big success he was at his new job and how the price of his success was that he worked fifteen-hour days seven days a week and how, even though he was a big success, they kept going deeper and deeper into debt because they had to send the boys to private school and summer camp and psychotherapy; and he had to go to psychotherapy himself since he was desperately unhappy because he hated his work. And how his wife had started to go through menopause and put on about twenty-five pounds; and how he came to loath his colleagues in the office so he dreaded going to work and how the only thing he looked forward to anymore was getting away and how he took as many business trips as possible and how content he was alone at night in a motel room rather like the one they were now occupying, after coming back upstairs from having a few drinks alone in the bar downstairs, stretching out on the bed, his tie loosened, watching pornographic movies; and how one day his cousin, who was just his age, had up and died and how when he had seen them lowering her coffin into the ground, he had realized that he was also going to die, and he hadn't done any of the things that he had really wanted to do with his life, and the next time he was on a business trip, he got off by mistake on the mezzanine of the hotel, where people were sitting at long tables, signing people in and giving them name tags and motioning them to different rooms and how he had stopped to look at some of the literature with pictures of people not that different from him, only they had satisfied looks on their faces, and he realized what this convention was; it was a swingers convention; it was always going on in every hotel and every motel in the country, only he had never been aware of it; he had been missing out all this time, and he took out a credit card and then put it back; his wife took care of the finances, and he didn't want to leave a paper trail, so he went to the ATM and paid with cash, and they gave him a name tag and a room key, and that was the first time, and this was the first time he had ever been to this tire shop.

“This is my first time, too,” Joanie said, thinking about all the times this man had said “I love you” to his wife: *Good night, sweetheart, I love you. I’ll be home around six. Have a good day, dear. I love you. I miss you, dear. I wish you could have come on this trip. I just wanted you to know I love you. I love you, dear, and I’m screwing a gym teacher. She’s in the shower now. I can’t stay on the phone long. Hope you’re having a good day.*

Joanie made room on the bed for the man to sit down next to her again. He took off his glasses and put them on the night stand, which was just as well, as she preferred to be a blur to him.

Was she expected to take off her blouse? She wasn’t quite ready to do that yet. Indeed, she hoped it wouldn’t be necessary. Sitting so close to the man she could see that several of the hairs on his chest were gray. It was sad, really. In his regular life, he had already peaked; he was already over the hill and sliding down the other side, but what he was doing with Joanie was the very beginning of something. That was how she imagined he saw it. She, on the other hand, was quite sure it was not the beginning of anything at all. She was only getting her tire mended. There had been a big screw in it, but they had gotten it out, and now they were patching it, and soon she would be on her way, off to work, only she wasn’t sure what the polite way would be to extricate herself from this situation. Really, she didn’t wish him ill. And also she was a little bit curious about what would happen if she stayed.

He bent down and put his tongue into her mouth. It was large and fleshy and filled her mouth completely, so that she was almost choking. She really didn’t know how people could do things like this. She leaned away, but his tongue was still in her mouth.

It was no longer attached to him.

The door opened, and several other couples crowded into the room, all wearing name tags and chatting. Joanie was glad she hadn’t taken any of her clothes off. All these people were fully dressed. She reached into her mouth and pulled out the man’s tongue—he hadn’t been wearing his name tag, and she had no idea what his name was—and she reached out and put it in his hand. His eyes looked a little blurry and out of focus. She folded his fingers over his tongue. She wanted to make sure he didn’t drop it. Then she stood up, smoothed out her skirt, and threaded her way through the couples, all engaged in animated conversation, down the little hallway to the door.

The lighting here at the rear of the tire shop was rather dim, but in a

a moment, her eyes adjusted, and she found her way back to the office.

“All set,” the man behind the counter said, looking up with a sheet of paper in his hand. “Your car’s out front. The key’s in it.” He handed the bill across the counter for her to sign. “Parts and labor,” he explained.

Joanie took a deep breath. She could see through the door of the office out to the entrance of the tire shop, where the fog was burning away. She grasped the pen the tire man offered and looked down at the paper in her hands.

“You’re good to go,” the tire man said.

There was a column for parts and a column for labor. To her relief, Joanie saw they were both blank.