

I wrote Kindness some years before I had any idea what to do with it. I think it arose from my attempts to justify my jujitsu fascination (which will turn up again) with Christianity. In 2012, I promised to release it for free if I reached a fundraising goal for water purification in Africa. It made it.

Kindness

Larry was driving home in the dark and he almost went right past Gordon. It wasn't that Larry didn't see him. Gordon's car was pulled over right under a streetlight, with a straight stretch of highway leading up to it, so Larry had time to think about whether to stop or not. He weighed the arguments against it carefully: It was late (by Larry's standards, anyway), there wasn't much of anything around, Larry was tired and he didn't want to get involved. But from another perspective, those were all reasons that a stranger in the breakdown lane would want his help. Larry pulled over just in front of the car.

Gordon had the hood up and was peering at the engine, looking frustrated. He squinted over the headlights as Larry approached. He had a patchy, unkempt beard and his windbreaker looked thin in the early March chill.

"You need a jump?" Larry called as he came closer.

"I don't... maybe... uh, I think it's the engine," Gordon said. "I mean, it turns over, just won't run. You know anything about cars?"

"Little bit," Larry said. The car was old and rusty, a Chevrolet. There was a black strap, maybe a rubber shock-cord, holding the trunk down. Getting closer, Larry saw black garbage bags piled in the backseat.

"This is just my luck," Gordon said. "I've got, like, fifty bucks cash and my mom calls, says dad had some kind of 'episode' and can I come home and to the hospital right away. I haven't eaten in a couple days..."

"Where's home?" Larry asked, peering at the motor. He put his hand on it and it felt a little warm, as if it'd been running maybe twenty or thirty minutes ago. He started checking the oil. "I'm Larry, by the way."

"Gordon." He fidgeted, put his hands in his windbreaker pockets. Larry could see streaks of engine grime on the coat's side. "Home's downstate, past Springfield. Not quite to St. Louis."

"Pleased to meet you, Gordon, though I wish the circumstances were different."

"They're about to get different."

Larry looked up and Gordon was pointing a gun at him.

"Sorry man. I really need a new ride."

Larry put his hands up. The gun was pointed right at his face, inches away. He narrowed his eyes, then leaned forward until the pistol barrel was touching the middle of his forehead.

“I was trying to help you,” he said.

Gordon drew in a breath to answer, and then there was a loud noise, and the crunch of a body hitting gravel.

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“Here’s how you take a gun off your face,” Cruz Delapore had told Larry, about eight months earlier. “First off—before we even get into all the *tanju* techniques, the first step is always ask yourself if it’s worth it. If some guy wants your wallet, your car, your *shoes* or whatever, my official advice as a police officer is *hand them over*. Wrestling for a gun is serious. Only do it if you think there’s a good chance he’s going to kill you or, y’know, kidnap your daughter or whatever.”

Larry had two daughters, five-year-old Caitlin and seven-year-old Margaret, but Sensei Cruz wasn’t speaking directly or exclusively to Larry. He was addressing a class of about thirty brown- and black-belt students at a weekend jujitsu seminar. Cruz was the guest instructor, he’d traveled all the way from California to teach the finer points of weapon disarms.

“If you’re sure the dude is going to take something you can’t give up, make sure the gun is *touching you*. I know, that doesn’t sound cool, but if it’s in contact with your body you know where it is and it might make him overconfident. Believe me, if he pulls the trigger, a few inches won’t make it hurt less.”

That line had gotten a laugh.

“Next step is to get him talking. Ask him a question. ‘What do you want?’ is always a good one. When he starts to answer, then you do *this*.”

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“OoowwwWWW!” Gordon’s cry started out low, like an air-raid siren, and got louder and higher as he curled, fetal, around his right hand. When it seemed like he couldn’t get any higher in pitch, he broke out into a stream of swearing.

When he’d been nine, Gordon’s mom had accidentally slammed a car door on his fingers. This hurt exactly as much.

“I was trying to *help you*,” Larry said again, and when Gordon looked up into the barrel of the gun—Larry had taken a few steps back and was pointing it down at Gordon’s face—the moment of fear cut through the shock and pain. He bit his lip.

Larry was clearly very angry. He glared, then moved the gun until it was pointing down in the ditch away from both of them. He pulled the trigger.

There was a click.

Larry pulled it three or four more times, hearing the dry-fire snap each time.

“That’s really bad for the firing pin,” Gordon said, and then couldn’t believe he’d said it. “Never mind.”

“I was trying to help you,” Larry said a third time, and his arms went limp. The gun dangled by his hip and his shoulders were slumped.

Like he just can’t believe this crap, Gordon thought, and he felt bad. Larry seemed like a nice guy. Ninety percent of Gordon’s thought-space was occupied with the pain in his hand, the *agony*, the *burning*, *searing line* down his pointer finger, but a good part of the remainder was contemplating how he, Gordon, had made this nice stranger sad.

“Dude, what did you do to my hand?”

Larry mumbled something. Gordon finally forced his body open so he could look down at his finger, and he shrieked.

A long strip of flesh had been peeled back, starting right past the knuckle and stopping at the fingernail. It reminded him of skinning a potato with an old-fashioned peeler, only red and excruciating.

“What did you say?” Gordon asked, mostly hoping to get his mind off what had been done to his hand.

“It’s called ‘de-gloving’,” Larry replied.

“You have a *name* for it?”

“You *asked* me what it was called.”

“I meant... I don’t know, did you use Kung Fu or something like that!”

“Something like that,” Larry said. “Let’s get you to a hospital and hand you off to the cops.”

“No man, no cops, c’mon, please?”

“You pointed a gun at me!”

“It wasn’t loaded, sheesh, I was desperate, okay?”

“Are the police after you?”

“Probably.” Gordon hesitated. “It’s... kinda not my car.”

“You stole it?”

“Not exactly, it’s... look, have you got a first-aid kit or something?”

“I don’t believe this,” Larry said, but he stomped off to his car and came back wearing latex gloves and holding a plastic box of sterile gauze and medical tape. As he squatted down near Gordon, he narrowed his eyes again.

“If you try anything stupid, I will *really* lose my temper.”

“Man, I promise you I do *not* want that. Ow. Hey, ow!”

“Quit squirming.”

“It hurts!”

“Cry me a river.”

“...okay, I deserved that.”

When his hand was wrapped enough that the red didn't show, Gordon thought about asking if Larry had any dope or pain meds, but he was pretty sure Larry wasn't the type. Considering it, Gordon figured there were people with loose dilaudid pills in their cars, and people with first-aid kits in their cars, but not too many people with both.

"How'd you get this car?" Larry asked. "Jack it with your empty gun?"

"It's my girlfriend's."

"Does it run?"

Gordon nodded.

"So wait: You were worried your girlfriend would call the cops on you for stealing a car, and you decided the answer was to *steal a car*? Didn't you think *I'd* call the cops?"

Gordon hung his head.

"Uhhh..."

"Good grief."

Gordon sat down on the gravel, staring down. Larry said nothing for a few moments, until he realized the other man was crying.

"I haven't slept in two days," Gordon said. "Slept or eaten. I'm sorry. Look man, could you just drive off and leave me? We'll pretend this never happened. I just want to get to my dad. That's totally real, man. I just want..." He paused to sob. "...my dad."

Larry stared down at Gordon. He looked small and pathetic, like Caitlin when she got knocked down at the playground. Larry wondered why he'd decided to fight the gun. His car? It wasn't anything special. He wondered what it had been that he couldn't give up.

"Can you drive?" Larry asked.

Uncertainly, Gordon nodded.

"There's a Denny's or a Perkins or something at the next exit. I'll buy you some flapjacks."

Gordon slowly stood up. He licked his lips, and his expression was worried, like he was afraid he wasn't getting some joke. "So... then after that...?"

"Look, don't be a jerk. We'll figure that out after, okay?"