

Chance Encounter?

Joe Brown was almost done for the day. It was his last day working the lines for the Petrol Gas Company. He was finally going to get a desk job. He was ready to let the younger guys crawl down manholes, what he called rat holes. He only had to test the seal on one last pipe joint, then he was done. He would go home and have a beer to celebrate. It was a hot August day and the thought of ice cold beer was enticing.

Joe was annoyed when he found a small leak. It meant he would have to shut the valve off, go up to the truck and pull out the sealant kit and it would take at least another half hour to fix. Joe, a lazy man, decided to take a short cut. He removed the wad of gum from his mouth, pushed it into the spot where the leak seemed to be and wrapped a piece of duct tape around it. Assuring himself the fix would last until the next maintenance check, he mentally patted himself on the back for a job well done and packed up to go home.

Sometime during the cold winter months the gum dried out leaving a small gap between the pipe and the tape. Like a mole digging under a suburbanite's lawn, the pressurized gas soon forged its way out. Molecules of natural gas meandered uphill for about a quarter of a mile constrained within the channel containing the gas pipe. There, some of the gas slipped through a crack and collected in a void several inches beneath the road surface.

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Grant Adams cranked up the radio as he sped along Main Street with the windows down. The Spring sun was shining brightly and the temperature was predicted to reach the mid-seventies. Grant thought he looked cool driving along in his white van, dressed in his Red Sox tee shirt and cap. He took the cigarette from his mouth to whistle at two teenage girls on the sidewalk. They frowned at him, but he didn't notice, having already passed by. The twenty-two year old delivered a regional newspaper to stores and vending machines around the area. He had worked for the paper for almost two years.

Always looking for a get rich quick scheme, Grant had recently decided it would be a snap to start his own delivery service, one to rival UPS and FedEx in a few short years. All he had to do was get the word out. He had set up a website, advertised in the papers and had a large ad painted on the side of the van. He named the business Grant Adams Worldwide Delivery reflecting his aspirations for growth. He had no means of shipping packages beyond the range and capacity of his only van but Grant felt he would be able to buy more vehicles and hire help as the business grew. He had already made a few deliveries and his customers were very pleased with his efficiency. Grant reveled at how easy it was to make money this way, failing to realize his speedy deliveries were only possible because of low volume. If he

stopped to add up the cost of advertisement, vehicle maintenance, gasoline and speeding tickets, he would have known how much money he was actually losing. Instead, the young man was happy with the thought he was advertising his own business while the newspaper job was paying him to drive around. His thoughts were interrupted when his cell phone rang.

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Dressed in a flowered blouse and denim skirt, Emily trudged along Main Street carrying a yellow canvas bag containing her lunch, small purse and a weighty book. Unlike Grant, she was miserable on this fine Spring morning. She hadn't slept well the night before, full of guilt and anxiety. *Oh Gawd, Oh Gawd, I shouldn't have done it*, she kept telling herself. She was heading for the library where she was a volunteer. The library had recently received a previously unknown collection of poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow from an anonymous donor. The head librarian, Betty Potts, was ecstatic on the day the collection was authenticated. It was all supposed to be kept hush-hush until Betty could provide proper security for the book. She was also working on a plan to publicize the acquisition in a way that would best promote the library.

Emily had always been a great fan of Longfellow. She had grown up in Portland, Maine, the town where he was born. She had learned about him in grade school and at sixty-two, she still read his poems every evening after supper. She couldn't help herself when she had been left alone in the archive room yesterday. She'd had to take at least a peek at the forbidden volume. Once she'd opened it, she couldn't leave it there. She had to take it where her eyes could devour it without fear of intervention. She had impulsively shoved the book into her canvass bag. Emily took it home intending to return it in a few days.

It was wonderful at first. She'd turned each page carefully and lovingly. The unfamiliar poems were exciting, as if he had written them just for her. She'd sat up half the night until she'd read them all twice. Then fear and guilt set in. Who did she think she was, putting this great work at risk? What would happen if Betty discovered it was missing? She would surely figure out who had taken it. The archive room was off limits to the public. Emily would be barred from the library. She might be charged with theft, maybe even spend time in prison. Emily didn't know what the work was worth, it was priceless to her, but surely it would be worth a great deal of money. *Oh Gawd, Oh Gawd, I shouldn't have done it*. She made up her mind to return it as soon as the library opened.

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Herman wasn't a bad man, he had just fallen on hard times. First, he'd lost his job, then his son had gotten ill and he'd had to dig deeply into the family nest egg. When the unemployment benefits ran

out, his wife started going to Food Pantry for groceries. He was only forty-two but he hadn't kept his skills up and now he couldn't seem to land a job. He'd go back to school if he could afford it.

Herman had to find money for the mortgage payment this month or they would lose the house soon. He was just going to have to steal again. There was no way around it. He hated doing it and was afraid of getting caught but he was desperate.

The nervous thief was hiding in an alley between two stores on Main Street, hardly noticing the cool breeze in the shade of the tall buildings. He pulled up the hood of his gray sweatshirt and waited for a suitable victim. Eventually, he saw an older woman walking down the street with a bag over her shoulder. He took a long drag on his cigarette and screwed up his courage.

Emily walked by the alley lost in her own thoughts. She had been gripping her bag tightly ever since she left her house. She wasn't afraid for her safety or even thinking of robbery, but she instinctively felt a need to protect the precious Longfellow poems. The library was just ahead on the other side of Main Street and she saw Betty unlocking the door. Emily had planned to get to work just after Betty. So far, so good.

Herman quietly fell in step behind Emily as she passed the alley, letting her get a few steps ahead of him. When she was almost at the crosswalk, he ran forward and grabbed Emily's bag from behind. Surprised at her iron grasp, he struggled with her, finally shoving her to the sidewalk and ripping the bag away.

"Stop! Thief!" she yelled weakly as he ran off with the bag. *Oh Gawd, Oh Gawd, don't let him get away with the Longfellow!*

Meanwhile, Grant was texting the details of last night's baseball game to a friend as he approached the library. He paused to flick cigarette ashes out the window just as Herman, trying to discourage anyone chasing after him, dashed in front of the van. Grant was going too fast to stop. He dropped his cigarette out the window and swerved to the right, hitting a light pole. There was a terrible din as metal, glass and rubber from different objects tried to occupy the same space at the same time. The impact caused the pavement near the pole to crack, releasing the dome of gas that had been collecting there for months. Embers from Grant's discarded cigarette ignited the spewing vapor. The blast rocked Main Street. Grant, saved from the impact by his air bag, jumped from the van. Herman was thrown forward and knocked unconscious by the blast, landing on the spacious front lawn of the library. The canvass bag came to rest several feet away from him.

Emily watched the whole scene in horror and disbelief from across the street, but she was more awestruck by the ad written in red letters on the side of the van:

GAWD Delivers

www.gawd.com

Emily, convinced the message was meant for her, muttered a quick prayer of thanks under her breath. She ran over to the library, and picked up her bag, taking a quick look inside to assure herself the book was still there. She burst through the library door and shouted, "Betty, call nine-one-one. There's been a terrible accident."

"I've already called. Thank goodness you're alright!" She was looking out the front window. "The van's on fire now. We should get out of the building. I didn't like the sound of that explosion."

Emily had started down the stairs to the archive room while Betty was distracted by the chaos outside. She stopped when she heard Betty's comment. She paused a few seconds, came back into the lobby, smiled and pointed at her bag.

"I was thinking the same thing. I went down to grab the Longfellow, just in case."

"You're one step ahead of me, Emily. There's so much I want to save," Betty sighed. "But, let's get out of here!"

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Over the course of the next several days, Emily learned from various news reports that Grant Adams had been cited for driving too fast and using a cell phone while driving. The Petrol Gas Company had also been cited for not maintaining their lines properly. A field supervisor named Joe Brown was fired from the company for submitting false inspection reports and might face further charges.

Herman was in the hospital and claimed not to remember anything leading up to the accident. His hearing was impaired and he had broken some bones but was expected to make a full recovery. When the public heard of Herman's financial plight, many had come through with aid, some even offered to hire him.

Grant mourned the loss of his van but was already planning a new career in real estate speculation.

Apparently, no one had seen Herman assault Emily and she wasn't going to report it. After all, she had stolen something herself. The Longfellow work was back in the library where it belonged. Emily had learned her lesson. Gawd had delivered.