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## Perfectly Stranded

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*frankly frightening*

# PERFECTLY STRANDED

BY DIANE HOLCOMB



THE ROADS WERE DEEPLY RUTTED FROM WEEKS OF SPRING RAINS. BUT ALLAN SAID, AS WE CAREENED DOWN THE STEEP HILL, "TWO INCHES UNDER THIS MUD, IT'S SOLID ROCK. NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT."

HE WAS RIGHT. WE MADE IT THROUGH TO SEVERAL OF THE OIL WELLS WE WERE INSPECTING ON THAT SUNNY SUNDAY AFTERNOON, HAVING GONE THE LONG WAY, THROUGH THE MAIN GATEKEEPER FOR JOHN ZINK'S SCOUT RANCH. ALLAN WAS SHOWING ME AND OUR THIRTEEN-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER, LAURA, THE NEW WAY TO OUR OIL LEASE (ALL MINERAL RIGHTS IN OSAGE COUNTY HAVE TO BE LEASED FROM THE OSAGE INDIAN TRIBE).

THE RECENTLY BUILT SKIA-TOOK LAKE HAD TAKEN OVER THE OLD ROADS. WE WERE ANXIOUS TO SEE HOW HIGH THE WATER HAD COME UP, FLOODING SOME OF OUR WELLS AND THE LAND THAT WE USED TO WALK OVER. LAURA WAS PLANNING TO SHOOT HER BB GUN FOR A LITTLE TARGET PRACTICE.

ALLAN PULLED UP BESIDE THE "POPCORN SHACK," AN ANCIENT

CONCESSION TRAILER CONVERTED TO TOOL WAREHOUSE. HE TURNED OFF THE OLD PICK-UP TRUCK'S IGNITION AND SAID, "OH, I DIDN'T MEAN TO DO THAT." THE TRUCK WAS DEAD. MORE PRECISELY, THE BATTERY, WHICH I NOW TOTALLY RECALLED THAT HE WAS CHARGING BEFORE WE LEFT THE HOUSE, WAS DEAD. WE WERE NOWHERE, WITH THE GATEHOUSE A RUTTED TEN MILES BACK, AND A FLOODED ROAD AND LAKE BEFORE US.

VISIONS OF HERSHEY BARS AND COLD PEPSI COLAS SUDDENLY CAME TO ME AS I REALIZED HOW UNPREPARED WE WERE FOR A LONG SIEGE OF WAITING FOR RESCUE.

"ANY CHANCE OF PAUL COMING UP HERE TODAY?" I ASKED, HOPEFULLY. PAUL IS OUR PUMPER.

"NOT LIKELY. IT'S HIS DAY OFF. HE GOES TO CHURCH," HE SAID.

"WELL," I SAID, "LUCKILY, WE LEFT JAMES AT HOME. WHEN NO ONE'S THERE TO TAKE HIM TO BAND PRACTICE TOMORROW MORNING, HE'LL NOTICE WE'RE NOT HOME AND SEND HELP."

JAMES IS OUR FOURTEEN-YEAR-OLD. HE HAD BETTER THINGS TO

DO THAN TREK OFF TO TALLY HIGH WATER. HE'D STAYED BEHIND TO WATCH WRESTLING ON TV.

"I'M GOING TO HIKE DOWN TO THE OLD ROAD AND SEE IF THERE IS ANYONE OUT TAKING A SUNDAY DRIVE TO LOOK AT THE WATER," ALLAN SAID. "IT'S ONLY ABOUT THREE MILES."

HE LEFT. IT WAS STRANGELY QUIET.

LAURA SUGGESTED REMOVING THE REAR-VIEW MIRROR AND FLASHING AN S.O.S. I TENDED TO AGREE WITH HER, BUT IT WASN'T YET TIME FOR DESPERATE MEASURES. I COULD JUST ENVISION THE HUMONGOUS BILL WE WOULD GET FOR THE LANDING OF A LIFE-FLIGHT HELICOPTER AND THE LOOKS ON EVERYONE'S FACES WHEN WE MERELY ASKED FOR A JUMP-START ON OUR BATTERY (AND/OR A PEPSI AND CANDY BAR). AT LEAST IT WAS BROAD DAYLIGHT AND THERE WAS NO LAUNDRY TO WASH OR ANY MEALS TO FIX. I COULD LEARN TO APPRECIATE THIS SITUATION.

TAKING STOCK OF MY PURSE, I FOUND FOUR CLORETS BREATH DEODORANT GUM PIECES. LAURA

AND I EACH TOOK ONE, AS IT WAS LUNCH-TIME, AND PUT THE OTHER TWO AWAY FOR "DINNER." THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE THE LEAST BIT USEFUL IN THE PURSE, EXCEPT SOME KLEENEX TISSUES AND THREE OR FOUR PENS.

JOHN ZINK'S RANCH IS SEVERAL HUNDRED ACRES OF WOODED LAND. THERE ARE MANY PONDS, ENOUGH NATIVE STONES TO BUILD A CASTLE, MUCH OLD OIL-WELL EQUIPMENT, AND THE TREES—LARGE AND SMALL. THERE ARE BIRDS AND CRITTERS OF ALL KINDS, BUT THERE ARE NO BATH-ROOMS.

I HAD ONLY THREE KLEENEX LEFT. ALLAN WAS COMING INTO VIEW, BUT HE HAD BEEN GONE FOR ONLY A FEW MINUTES, THOUGH IT SEEMED LIKE HOURS, AND HE WAS ALONE.

"IT'S FLOODED UP TOO FAR," HE SAID. WE DISCUSSED DOING OUR S.O.S. BIT ON THE HORN, BUT HE DECIDED TO HIKE BACK TO THE GATEHOUSE TEN MILES UP THE HILL. AFTER HE LEFT, LAURA AND I WERE AFRAID TO HONK THE HORN IN CASE HE MIGHT THINK WE WERE SUMMONING HIM BACK, BUT WE SECRETLY THOUGHT IT A BETTER PLAN.

LAURA BEGAN TO BUSY HERSELF DOODLING ON THE BACKS OF THE WELL LOGS, STACKS OF PAPER ALLAN LEAVES LYING AROUND IN THE PICK-UP FLOOR "OFFICE." SHE WAS DOING TRACINGS AROUND AN OLD LID SHE HAD FOUND. "LID ART," SHE DUBBED IT.

I PICKED UP A PIECE OF THE GRAPH PAPER. THE SQUIGGLES ON IT LOOKED LIKE SOMETHING FROM A LIE-DETECTOR TEST. I TURNED IT OVER AND BEGAN TO WRITE MY OWN VERSION OF A SWISS FAMILY ROBINSON.

THE PRIMITIVE BEAUTY OF OUR NATURAL SURROUNDINGS WAS SLIGHTLY MARRED BY A CHUG-CHUGGING SOUND, CAUSED BY THE MOTOR OF THE OLD VINTAGE 1930'S PUMP HOUSE ABOVE US AND A FAINT DRIFT OF BRYAN ADAMS SINGING "I NEED SOMEBODY" FROM LAURA'S EVER-PRESENT PORTABLE RADIO EAR-

PHONES.

WE WONDERED IF THE BUZZARDS CIRCLING OVERHEAD HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH US. WE FANTASIZED ABOUT USING LAURA'S BB GUN TO SHOOT OUR DINNER AND OF USING AN OLD BEER CAN TO HEAT POND WATER FOR DRINKING. WE MUST KEEP OUR SPIRITS HIGH.

NO HUNTING IS ALLOWED ON THE RANCH, NOR FISHING, NOR MOTORCYCLING, NOR OVERSIZED TRUCKS, NOR SPEEDING. THERE WAS AN OUTSIDE CHANCE THAT WE MIGHT DO ONE OF THESE FORBIDDEN THINGS AND CONCEIVABLY BE "CAUGHT." IF ONLY WE HAD BROUGHT A RIFLE WITH US, ONE SHOT WOULD SURELY BRING SOMEONE DOWN ON US. AH, WELL.

AFTER AN HOUR HAS PASSED, THERE'S NOTHING TO DO BUT NOTICE THE MINUTIAE (LAURA, MUTTERING SOMETHING ABOUT DAIRY QUEEN, WAS TRYING TO TAKE A NAP). THE DUSTY BLUE DASHBOARD IN FRONT OF ME CONTAINED A PAIR OF BROKEN SUNGLASSES, A PAIR OF BROKEN SAFETY GLASSES, AND A POST-IT NOTE WITH A GRAPHIC PICTURE IN PEN AND INK SIGNED "BY LAURIE." SMASHED BUGS ON THE WINDSHIELD FORCED CONTEMPLATION OF MY OWN FRAGILE MORTALITY.

A SHORT DISTANCE OFF, THERE ARE HILLS TO THE FRONT AND BACK OF US, HILLS TO THE LEFT AND RIGHT. WITH ALLAN GONE FOR HELP, THERE'S NOTHING TO DO BUT WAIT. I WISH THAT I HAD MORE THAN A PASSING FANCY FOR SCENIC WONDERS. I LONGED FOR TALL BUILDINGS AND MAN-MADE FEATS. AND LESS OF AN IMAGINATION. I BEGIN TO THINK OF SNAKES AND RICOCHETING BB'S. I WORRY THAT ALLAN HAS BEEN AMBUSHED BY BOY SCOUT CAMPERS WHO THINK HE LOOKS MORE LIKE AN ESCAPED CONVICT THAN A BUSINESSMAN IN WEEKEND GRUNDIES. WHAT IF JAMIE, LEFT TO HIS OWN DEVICES TOO LONG, BURNS DOWN THE HOUSE TONIGHT, FIXING HIS OWN GRILLED CHEESE.

THE FLASHLIGHT IN THE GLOVE BOX HAS A DEAD BATTERY. I MAKE A MENTAL NOTE TO BE MORE PREPARED IN THE FUTURE. JUST BECAUSE THIS IS NOT THE VEHICLE I USUALLY DRIVE IS NO EXCUSE.

OF COURSE, THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN IS THAT WE WILL HAVE TO SPEND THE NIGHT HERE, AND ONLY IF NO ONE IS AT THE GATEHOUSE IN FIVE HOURS, OR HOWEVER LONG IT TAKES A SEMI-SEDENTARY, MIDDLE-AGED (THOUGH HANDSOME) MAN TO WALK TEN MILES (OR HAVE A HEART ATTACK). HAD ALLAN NOT BEEN WITH US, WE WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN AT THE LEASE IN THE FIRST PLACE. WE WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN IN THIS PREDICAMENT (BY MYSELF, I TEND TO GET STRANDED ONLY AT GROCERY STORES OR ON WELL-TRAVELED ROADS). OH, WELL. I DID TAKE THE TIME TO PUT ON MAKE-UP BEFORE WE LEFT. ONE MUST LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE. I PEEK AT LAURA. OUR HAIR IS CURLED. WE'LL LOOK FAIRLY GOOD WHEN THEY FIND OUR CARCASSES.

PERHAPS, AS A PROTECTION AGAINST PANIC, I'LL TELL MYSELF FAIRY TALES: MAYBE ALLAN HAS RUN INTO SOMEONE AT THE OTHER LEASES WE HAVE PASSED, AND THEY ARE ON THEIR WAY BACK TO US AT THIS VERY MINUTE. WAIT. I THINK I HEAR SOMEONE COMING. I HOLD MY HEAD HIGH AND STILL, LIKE BAMBI'S MOTHER. IT IS ONLY THE WIND RUSTLING THE LEFTOVER DRY LEAVES IN THE OAK TREES. THEY'RE RIGHT NEXT TO THE MAPLES THAT HAVE TINY, RED LEAF-BUDS CURLED LIKE POINTY RACCOON FINGERS, WAITING FOR MORE BALMY SUN TO COAX THEM FLAT. WHAT AN IMAGINATION. WHAT A BUMMER.

SUDDENLY, AT TWO O'CLOCK, THE RUSTLING LEAVES TURN INTO A GRAY PICK-UP WITH JUMPER CABLES AND TWO MEN. ONE OF THEM IS TIRED AND HANDSOME AND CLAIMS TO HAVE WALKED SIX MILES IN WHAT HAS BEEN ABOUT 1 1/2 HOURS.... NOW WHAT AM I GOING TO FIX FOR DINNER WITH NOTHING THAWED OUT? 