

By the Numbers

By Paul Kershaw

“**O**ne day, we’ll all look back on this and laugh.” That was Dave, ever the optimist. He was smiling stupidly, since he was already willing to look at it and laugh but knew he’d probably get his ass kicked for doing so.

Adam, the cynic, looked at him and snorted. Adam wasn’t nearly so generous as I was about Dave; while I was thinking he was an optimist, Adam’s preferred word was probably “simpleton.”

Candace, our sole female, put her arm around Dave in false empathy. She had a mild smile on her face, although I could tell from the tightness around her eyes that she was privately annoyed. She patted Dave’s shoulder and scowled prettily at Adam.

“It’s just a flat tire,” I said, reclining into the front passenger seat of Adam’s ‘88 Seville. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal, *Bill*,” – he said my name loudly, punctuated because I’d apparently never heard it before – “is that I don’t have a spare.”

“Who drives around in the city without a spare?” Candace asked.

Adam shot her a look in the rearview. “People who barely have money to keep their cars running in the first place, *Candy*.”

She bristled at the nickname, but pretended to let it slide.

Dave shrugged. “So we find a gas station and get the tire fixed.” Simple answer for a simple person: That was one of Dave’s endearing qualities, although at times it got rather annoying.

Adam moved his rearview stare to him, adjusting the mirror to do it.
“Sure. In the ghetto. On a Saturday night.”

“This isn’t the ghetto,” Candace said. “Stop being so racist.”

I kept mum, watching out the window. It was a poor neighborhood, not the best I’d seen, but Candace was right, it wasn’t quite the ghetto, either. I imagined it wasn’t that much worse than where Adam lived.

Adam readjusted his mirror again. It seemed to me that he was going through more work than turning around would have been, but he had a point to prove, which was that he was in a car in a deadly neighborhood with a bunch of idiots who didn’t understand the gravity of the situation.

“Well, Candy, since you feel so safe, why don’t *you* go get a tire?”

She folded her arms and glowered at Dave, trying to get support. Dave wouldn’t know a chivalrous defense if it bit him on the buttocks, so he just shrugged back at her. “You and I could go.”

We were parked on a side street somewhere in Detroit, with no real clue about where we were. Adam had decided to take a “short cut” to the concert, but St. Andrew’s is in the part of town where one wrong turn could leave you in the middle of nowhere. Which is where we were.

“Look, we can’t be too far from Woodward,” I said. “There should be gas stations there.”

Dave suddenly lit up, “Hey, Adam, what about your cell phone?”

Adam snorted at him again. “No batteries.”

Candace snorted back. “I guess you were never a boy scout, eh?”

This time, Adam *did* turn around, giving her a confused look. She smiled back sweetly: “You know, ‘Be prepared’?”

He turned forward again and punched the dashboard while I suppressed a smirk.

“Two of us should go, and two of us should stay here.” I had my feet on the dashboard, and was curled up nonchalantly.

“Divide and conquer, eh?” Adam fiddled with the steering wheel, unconsciously pretending to drive.

Candace rolled her eyes; I was watching her in the vanity mirror on the back of the visor. “Can it, Adam. Bill’s right.”

Of course I was. I always was. Cool as a cucumber in a crisis, nothing seemed to phase me, but I didn’t seem to have that simplistic *joie de vivre* of Dave’s. Inside, I was a mess of insecurity, but I rarely let the show.

“So who goes?” Dave was trying to resist the urge to play with Adam’s headrest. He was obviously getting bored; we weren’t nearly entertaining enough for him, and he was trying to decide whether picking a fight with Adam would be a good thing or a bad thing.

“It’s Adam’s car.” Candace eyed him.

“That’s because none of you cheap-asses will do anything else about transportation,” he shot back. “It was your idea, maybe you should go.”

“Candace stays,” Dave said, surprisingly assertive. “You two go.” He motioned to the two of us in the front seat.

I considered him, an eyebrow crooked.

His firm stance shriveled under my gaze. “I mean... she’s a girl... you know...”

She shot him a look then. “This isn’t Beirut. It’s downtown Detroit.”

“Same thing,” Adam snorted.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake.” Candace opened her door and moved to get out. “Come on, Bill. Let’s leave these two babies and get this done.”

Adam sat up defensively. “I’m not a baby. I’m just... concerned.”

“That’s right, rampaging gangs of white-hating thugs are just around the corner, ready to beat us to a bloody pulp and take all our money.”

Adam looked hesitantly out the front window. “Well... maybe...”

Candace rolled her eyes again and swatted the back of my seat. “You coming?”

I extricated myself from my position and swung the door open. “Where’s the spare?”

Adam grudgingly handed me the keys. I noticed that Dave was now occupying himself by looking around the corners of buildings for the gangs of thugs.

After I got the spare out, I tossed Adam his keys, and the two of us were on our way.

Three blocks and two turns later, we’d found what appeared to be a major artery, although it wasn’t Woodward.

“Geez, where did Adam take us?” Candace looked around for a street sign. “Martin Luther King. Great.”

“Not too far off, I guess.” I shrugged. I wasn’t quite sure where we were, and where we should be.

Candace sighed. “I guess we should have been paying attention. With Adam, you never know.”

“It was a ‘short cut,’” I pointed out. “Those are rarely short-cuts.” I set the tire down for a moment, adjusted myself a little, and picked the tire back up. It was starting to get heavy, and even though we’d found a major road, I wasn’t sure we were much closer to a solution.

“North or south?” I asked at last.

“That depends. Which way is north?”

“I’m not sure, actually. For all I know, MLK runs east-west. I’m an Oakland County brat, I don’t get down here much.”

She stood akimbo, studying both directions, while I leaned to balance the weight of the tire, my forearm through the wheelhole. That’s how we were standing when we met Eve and Francesca.

“Girl, look at them dumb-ass crackers.” That was Eve, talking to Francesca. They were walking along the road, going south (or what I’d dubbed south in my mind). I looked them over, holding my pose. Eve had rich chocolate skin that soaked up the moonlight, an Amazon that stood higher than me. Francesca looked Hispanic, but turned out to be Asian. They were both dressed as if we’d interrupted them at work, with this corner being their workplace.

“You got problem,” Francesca pointed out, pointing at my tire.

I tried to ignore them, turning back to Candace. “Well, which way?”

Francesca laughed. "You deaf, and you got problem."

"Uh-huh, he ain't deaf, Frannie, he stupid." Eve stood up close to me, close enough I could smell not just her perfume, but the soap underneath it.

I turned away from them, trying not to look shaken. I wasn't used to strangers talking to me, and especially not in Downtown Detroit on a Saturday night.

But Candace turned towards her. "We need a tire fixed. Do you know where we can go?"

Eve raised her eyebrows high. "I'll tell you where crackers can go around here."

"No place open," Francesca pointed out. "You got big problem."

"We've got cash," I said, probably too loud.

This time, Eve looked square at me. "And you ain't got it long, you don't shut your mouth."

I curled up a little bit and thought about stepping away, but stood my ground.

She studied me long and hard. "Tell you what, my brother, he got a garage. You walk back the way you came, go up two blocks, ask for Leron. He closed, but if you got enough cash, he fix you up."

"We take them," Francesca said. "Slow night."

Again Eve raised her eyebrows, this time swiveling over to Francesca. "Aw, hell, like I got nothin' better to do than take care of some dumb crackers?"

“Slow night,” Francesca said again.

Eve sighed. “All right, whatever. Let’s go.”

All this happened without us saying anything one way or another, and before I knew it – and against my better judgment – we were following them.

“**F**our years,” Eve said. “How long you been an idiot?”

She was responding to Candace’s typically blunt question, “So, how long have you been a prostitute?” I was trying to focus on carrying my tire, but Candace (having nothing to keep herself occupied) was trying to make idle conversation.

She looked taken aback. “It was just a question. I’m curious about these things.”

Eve stopped, looked Candace over, and shook her head in disgust. Francesca laughed to break the ice. “Maybe she look for new career?”

Eve rolled her eyes over at Francesca, then started to walk again. We walked on in silence, which was good enough for me.

Apparently, it wasn’t good enough for Candace, though: “Actually, I *have* thought about it...”

Francesca elbowed Eve: “See? I told you.”

But Eve wasn’t amused. “You think I chose this? You ain’t nothing but a dumbass cracker, bringing your bullshit around here.” She looked at Candace again. “What do you do, anyhow? Coming around here with your talkity talk.”

“I work with computers.” Vague enough answer.

“See? That’s just what I’m talking about. We got one computer on our block, one. It’s all about money and class, that’s what. And you come around here with your flat tires, and I bet you got two friends back watching your car because you think we’re all out to steal your shit. Damn. When you get that tire fixed, you’re gonna drive back to your little cracker house, and you’re gonna never give another thought to me. You think we’re cute and quaint and part of the scenery.”

Candace looked away, trying to focus on something in the distance, but Eve wasn’t finished. “You think this is a great life? Watching your life slip away, as you get to pick between laying it down to rich whites and crackheads, or riding the bus for an hour to get to a burger joint for minimum wage, while your brother gets busted ‘cause he’s on the wrong corner when the drug cops pull a raid, and watching your father get blown away over a wristwatch?”

Candace walked on as Eve stopped, her nostrils flared. She grabbed Candace by the shoulder and whirled her around. “I’m talking to you!”

I stopped too, and Francesca and I looked at each other in the awkward silence; she was smiling at me, a fake smile that I knew was designed to sucker me into a business deal. I hitched up the tire uncomfortably again.

“Life is hard,” Candace said quietly, her throat choked up with tears.

Eve grabbed her hard by the elbow and said, “Yeah? What’s the worst thing that ever happened to you?”

Candace pulled away. “Things I don’t tell to strangers, that’s what.”

Their eyes met, and I couldn’t tell if that chill in my stomach was the weather or the conversation, but I just wanted this to stop.

“We take too long,” Francesca said at last. “We go now. Hurry.”

And after another moment of icy tension, Eve snorted, and we were off again. I tried to put my arm around Candace, but she batted it away.

Five minutes later, we were standing in front of a two-story 1920s era bungalow that looked like it hadn't been repaired in several decades: The roof was sagging, the paint was peeling, the house number was presented in several different formats (brass letters, reflective stickers, and spray paint), and the backyard was fenced off as a kennel for several large dogs.

All the same, it was one of the few houses on the block that still looked inhabitable, or occupied.

I watched the porch stairs dubiously as Eve went up them. “Leron!” she was shouting. “Where you at?”

There was no answer, so she banged through the front door. The screen clattered shut behind her. “Leron!” I heard her shout again inside the house, then again.

“Leron ain't here!” The voice came from right next to me, and made me jump. I turned to see an older black man walk past me as if I weren't even there. “What you want him for?”

Eve came back out, the door slamming loudly again. “Where he at, George?”

George had moved to the bottom of the stairs, after nodding his head to greet Francesca. Candace and I were apparently invisible. “He went by the store.” Then, after a beat, he said, “You know you ain't supposed to bring your business around here.”

She rolled her eyes. "It ain't my business, George. They got a flat needs fixing."

He looked at me now, and considered the tire slung over my shoulder. I'm not sure what he thought the tire was for, assuming we *were* "business."

"The garage closed," he told me.

"Well, we're kind of in a bind, here. We're stuck." I did my best to look pitiful.

"Ain't you got a spare?"

I sighed. "This *is* the spare."

He thought about this a minute. "What kind of dumb idiot would drive around Detroit at night without a spare?"

"I wasn't driving," I responded.

He nodded his head sadly, and looked back at Eve. "What you bring them here for?"

Eve pointed at Francesca accusingly, and George followed her gaze.

"What *you* bring them here for?" he asked.

"They got cash," Francesca pointed out. "A lot of cash."

George laughed heartily. "Well, well, why didn't you say so?" He looked back at me. "The garage just opened."

“Six dollars for the repair, thirty dollars for opening up late,” George said as he bounced the re-inflated tire at me. “It ain’t great, but it’ll hold for the night.” We were at Leron’s garage, hidden on a side street corner. I wasn’t even quite sure where we were anymore, or (more importantly) where the car was.

“Fair enough,” Candace said, then looked at me expectantly.

I looked from her to him. “I got ten bucks.”

“Then you got a problem. Because it’s thirty-six bucks.”

“I could write you a check.”

He looked at me disdainfully. “Guy come walking around in the ghetto on a Saturday night without the brains to have a spare tire in his trunk, and you want me to think he got good checks? You must be crazy.”

“It’s not even my car,” I repeated.

He sighed and looked down at the ground, expectantly, as the overhead light buzzed.

“I’ve got five dollars and some change,” Candace said helpfully. “Maybe the guys at the car have some more money.”

“Maybe they do,” I agreed. “We should have thought of that before.”

“Well,” George said, “It ain’t but a few blocks. How about I stay here with your tire and your girlfriend, and you go get me my money?”

“I’m not his...” Candace started, but I interrupted her:

“I’m not sure where it is, to be honest.”

George shook his head. “How do you people make it through the day alive? Well, I tell you what, you go find that car and you find it quick because every fifteen minutes I gotta wait costs you another five bucks.”

I looked at my watch. 11:30. The concert we’d come down for was supposed to have started around 11, the headliners were. Damn Adam, now it was going to cost God knows how much more to get out of this, and all for nothing.

I shrugged. “I guess that’s what we’ll have to do then.” I looked around the parking area – it really wasn’t big enough to call a lot – and tried to get my bearings. One day we’ll all laugh about this, Dave had said. I certainly hoped so.

Candace looked at me, then plopped gracelessly down onto the cement, as if she was preparing to stay there quite some time and had resigned herself to her fate. Her eyes suggested that she thought she was bound to be sold into slavery, but I thought that was a little bit paranoid.

I looked around, decided on the best route more out of desperation than actual knowledge, and set off.

Seven hours ago, I had been leaving my job as a Xerographic Consumer Interface Specialist at Kinko’s and preparing for a normal night out. Now I was wandering the streets of downtown Detroit without a clear sense of where I was, knowing that I shouldn’t be there. All because of something as mundane as a tire.

How did that children’s rhyme go? For the want of a nail, the horse was lost, for the want of a horse, the soldier was lost... For the want of a tire, I was lost.

I lost track of how far I’d wandered. It seemed like forever, and it seemed like the neighborhood just kept getting worse. I passed an entire block

that had been leveled, nothing more now than weeds sticking up in the fertile patches of an otherwise barren wasteland. Once upon a time, this was a frontier town, a fort along the river. This was somebody's squash patch, or their horse corral.

Or maybe I was far enough from the river that this would have been past the edge of the original fort, and didn't get built up until later. Maybe this had originally been a blacksmith's or a bicycle shop. I imagined the Wrights having their shop here, although that was probably mind pollution from Greenfield Village... weren't the Wrights from North Carolina?

I imagined this was Greenfield Village, with all its 18th and 17th century homes anachronistically strewn together. The broken, weed infested street I was walking down became cobblestone; a horse and carriage passed by me; a woman with a parasol and a skirt that was far too big to be functional waved a gloved hand at me.

And then there was the Great Depression, and then there were the race riots, with Detroit hit among the hardest of any of the major urban areas. Detroit died in the 1960s, years before I was born. My father used to tell me about it when I was little.

I was walking around in the corpse of a great city that had taken three decades to stir out of its long slumber, and I was smack dab in the middle of one of its tumors.

It was getting cold, and I was wondering what I was doing here, and whether I'd ever find my way back out. I had no idea where I was, and the more I walked, the more lost I became. There were no more major arteries, which seemed odd because of how far downtown we'd been. I'd been downtown before, and it seemed like, no matter where you went, you were always only a few blocks from somewhere recognizable.

I didn't recognize anything. I didn't know how to get back to the garage. I didn't know how to get back to the car.

I came to a dirt lot in the middle of which was a ratty old couch sitting all by itself. The springs were showing through the ribbed pink fabric, faded from some unknown amount of time under the sun. It had probably been originally red, a rich crimson, but now it was just a dull salmon, abandoned under the full moon.

I was tired, so I didn't care. I stretched out on the couch and gazed up at the sky as a cloud swallowed the moon and began to rain.

Eight years old. I was watching *The Empire Strikes Back* on TV, huddled under a blanket on the couch. A brown and orange Afghan, handmade. It smelled vaguely like my dog. Luke was entering the cave. Yoda had told him not to go in with his saber. The light were off. It was night. My parents were out for the night. The babysitter was in the next room. I don't remember what she was doing. I smelled popcorn. Darth Vader attacked. Luke defended. The humm whizz woosh of light sabers. Bzzzt. My cat was asleep on my feet. She jumped up when I moved. I curled up tighter on the couch. Beep beep beep went the microwave in the kitchen. Vader loses his head. It's Luke inside. I cover my eyes. Lightning outside, right on time. Then the TV goes dark. Quiet seeping in like molasses. It filled my head. Somewhere, the babysitter checked on me. Candlelight, one little flame. Then zzt-pop! And the TV comes back on to a dog food commercial. Her face looked odd against the sudden flickering of the light. It made her jump, but just a little. I started to giggle. I wasn't sure why. But I just started to giggle.

I jumped awake. I'd fallen asleep on that couch, and it took me a few moments to figure where I was. Downtown somewhere, stranded. I checked my watch. Half-past midnight. Jesus, I'd been out for an hour. Candace must be ready to kill me, not to mention Adam and Dave.

I sat up, and looked around. Across the street was a small church, it looked Baptist and looked mostly disused, but there were ancient letters

on the marquee telling me it was St. Jude's Renaissance Tabernacle of Jesus. The door was open, and there were faint strains of organ music inside, as well as a bright light that shone, blindingly, on the dark street. For the first time, I noticed most of the street lamps were out.

Of course, wandering into a strange church after midnight on a Saturday night was probably not the best of ideas, but I'd seemed to have thrown all my better judgment to the wind. Normally, I was mellow but not reckless; few knew it, but I was actually pretty guarded in what I did and didn't do, weighing out each decision carefully.

Tonight wasn't the night for that, though.

I stood up carefully, damp from the light rain, and walked across the street and into the church.

Inside, despite the choir music, the church was mostly empty. Standing next to the pulpit, leaning against it for support, was a wizened old black man, smiling softly. He was missing his upper teeth.

"What's this all about?" I asked him.

"You come for answer. I give you answer." He spoke in a deliberate Jamaican accent.

"I'm lost," I said.

"Yah, dat I know, and so do you." He smiled his enigmatic smile.

"No, I mean, I'm lost. I don't know where I am. I have friends who are waiting for me."

"We are all lost, child, when we tink that dis place or dat place be where we need to get to. But you always know where you are."

I squinted at him. "Where's that?"

“Right here.” He laughed. “What you tink, all the answer be snap snap easy? You stuck, child. You stuck between dis world and anotter one, you not supposed to be here. You all wound up, all tied up and you need to unwind yourself to get back to where you tink you should be.”

“Are you God?” I asked him, apropos of nothing but still half-awake.

He laughed heartily. “One of dem.” He waved me off. “Now, you get out of dis place, go back where you belong. Walk around the church for nine times, and den you’ll see everyting make sense.”

I looked out the door, then looked back at him, but by then he was gone.

Nine times I walked around the church, counterclockwise because it seemed like the right thing to do.

After the first circuit, I began to wonder what I was expecting. This was reality, after all... maybe I was still asleep.

After the second circuit, I was tempted to look around, but something in the tone of the man’s voice had led me to believe that I had to keep looking forward, no matter what.

After the third circuit, I was beginning to feel like a prime idiot. I was exhausted, tired, and anxious that I’d be trapped here for the night, if not longer.

After the fourth circuit, my mind stopped focusing on what I was doing and wandered off into daydreams. One part of my mind had decided that my body was dedicated to this task, no matter how ludicrous it was, and there was no point trying to dissuade it.

After the fifth circuit, I was only vaguely aware of the church, and of the ghetto around me. My feet knew where to go, and I had an increasingly acute awareness of each rise and fall of the path.

After the sixth circuit, I began to panic that I'd lost count. The two levels of my mind had separated out: One part was obsessed with memorizing every bit of the lay of the land around the church, and the other had faded so far from reality that only the moon above entered into its awareness.

After the seventh circuit, I began to get dizzy, and wondered if I could make it the other two laps. My legs were starting to throb with a numbness my daydreaming mind was both ignoring and studying with great intensity.

After the eighth circuit, I imagined that the world around me had changed entirely. I began to anticipate the flowers, the sunshine, the hustle and bustle of the awakening city around me. I thought about the epiphany that awaited me at the end of the final circuit, and even though my legs ached and my feet hurt, I started to walk faster.

After the ninth circuit, I stopped abruptly and looked around. I felt as my various levels of awareness gathered together again into the singleness of me.

Nothing had changed. The street was the same, the church was the same, the lack of streetlights was the same, the ratty old couch across the street was the same.

Nothing had changed. All that I'd gotten out of the exercise was sore feet and a mild headache. Where were the answers?

I laughed at myself. There are no answers. It's just a lousy tire. It's all about a lousy tire, and there doesn't always need to be anything greater than that. All this mysticism, and it was nothing. The old guy was probably just a hypnagogic illusion. I think too much.

A white Seville pulled up by the curb: Adam's. With four tires. And three people inside.

I blinked to make sure it was really there, about the same time that Adam honked the horn.

Tentatively, I approached the car. It seemed like an illusion, between my aching legs, my strange mood, and the vague hunger in my stomach that I'd only just noticed.

"Where the Hell have you been?" Adam asked.

"Looking for you," I said. "How did you..."

Candace rolled her window down to match Adam's. "George got sick of waiting for you after about half an hour. He took me back to the car, which was just around the corner. You went the wrong way."

Adam smirked. "Hot shot got lost. We've been looking for you for an hour. I just wanted to abandon you, but you know how these people are."

I wasn't sure if he was serious. "Well, I'm glad you didn't."

Candace punched the back of his seat. "Don't mind him, he's a jerk. C'mon, get in and let's get going."

Absently, I got in the backseat next to her and settled in. They went back to their usual passive-aggressive chitchat, an odd mix of loving hostility, and I drifted off again, watching the neighborhood slide away as we reached King, and then the highway.

For the want of a tire, the concert was lost. In the end, that's all it really was. That and the thirty dollars George had settled on, that none of us could really afford for a lousy patchjob on a bald tire.

"One day, we'll all laugh about this." For some reason, that got me laughing, and I chuckled myself to sleep. As I drowsed away, I glanced at my watch. It was 1:30.

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