

Hello everyone, and welcome back to an old guy who knows shit. Stluhdog here. this is

Episode 5

Richard

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So we finally get back to the story Richard, which tantalized you with in the introduction. that teaser was out of the middle of the story, this time you get the whole story.

It was the funniest looking car I had ever seen. It looked kind of like a Volkswagen beetle got stuck in a compressor. It was tiny. And I had traveled across country in the back seat of a Beetle, and it was spacious compared to the back seat of this car. He called it a Saab, which in 1970 we had never seen nor heard of. It was beat up, looked like it had been to the wars, with scratches and dents and crooked bumpers and torn, dusty seats – I swear it looked like a cartoon car. Darlene and I, relieved as we were to get a ride, were extremely dubious about crossing Pennsylvania in this beat up toy. We were starting to question the wisdom of our adventure.

Now that I have a perspective on it, it was, perhaps foolhardy. But we had been dating for two years in high school. Which was a catholic high school and we were good catholic children and vowed to remain chaste, which we succeeded in doing until the very end of my senior year, when we finally just could not stop ourselves and it was ugly and she had a false pregnancy and it was a huge scare which we could not keep from our parents and, well, all in all, it was a pretty poor excuse for a first time, especially after having two years of foreplay. Our parents separated us for the summer, but she was at my college probably the second weekend of the semester, and THAT was what the first time SHOULD have been. So anyway, once the floodgates were open, Darlene came up to visit every chance she had, and we concocted this idea that we needed a honeymoon to celebrate our new-found “togetherness,” so we planned one. Never mind that we had no money whatsoever. My school trimester ended before thanksgiving, and we could take a couple of weeks to go wherever we wanted. So where did we decide to go? New York City. Why not? We were both into the school plays and stuff and that was where Broadway was and there was no place we wanted to go to more than New York. We put together all of our cash and decided that we had enough for a hotel, a meal or maybe two a day, and a couple of shows, if we could just get ourselves there. Well, in 1970, to children of the 1960s, that was no problem. We would hitchhike.

Now I do not recommend this to anyone today. There are just too many weirdos out there. There were just as many weirdos back then, but what did we know? We weren't far from I-80. Just get on it and it would take us straight to New York city. So we packed up a couple of packs, made a sign, had a friend give us a ride to the highway, and stuck out our thumbs.

We had pretty good luck that first day. Got a ride pretty quickly to I-80. Got a ride on I-80 pretty fast, took us into Indiana, left us at a rest area where our sign got someone's attention almost right away going most of the way across Ohio, and we were looking at

each other with big smiles on our faces. Well, I-80 across Ohio is a turnpike. We got dropped off on a ramp, and the next vehicle to stop was a cop. Informed us that no hitchhiking whatsoever was allowed on the turnpike. But we told him our story – which it seems to me may have included a sick parent or something – and he took pity on us and took us to a service area. He showed us a hallway where he said we could legally hang out, but – and this he said with kind of a wink – no law enforcement officer better see that sign at any time. So we assured him that no law enforcement officer would see our sign, and that we would be on our way as soon as we could. Great. Don't sit on the floor either. Yeah. Sure. But... no chairs. nothing, in fact, to sit on at all. This was probably ten, eleven o'clock at night, just on the wrong side of Youngstown, in a run-down service area that looked like a refugee from World War II, we had to not get caught with our sign and not sit on the floor. So we took turns watching the vehicles come in, while the other held the sign and looked pitiful, but we got no bites. No nibbles. Nobody talked to us. Nobody paid us any attention whatsoever. It was like we weren't there. And this went on for hours. That spot became our new home. By 3AM it seemed like we had been there forever, that we were lost in a Twilight Zone episode where time stops and we become mannikins in a service station display. Everybody who did look at us clearly thought we were scum. It was humiliating and very humbling. We were starting to wonder what would happen if we never got a ride out of this place. How long would we stay before we would be forced to call our parents to drive halfway across the country to come rescue us.

It was probably an hour before dawn, I'm guessing 5-6 ish, we're sitting on the floor, leaning back-to-back with the sign propped under an arm (screw the cops) and dozing, when, for the first time since what had to have been last Tuesday, there was a person standing next to us, looking down at us.

“Need a ride?”

Ah, the music of the gods. The magical words that we had dreamed of hearing for so long. Out of the fog of despair three words lifted us to our feet as if by magic. They were spoken by a young man, looked to be in his twenties, wearing only trousers and a white shirt, both wrinkled but clean. His most recognizable feature was a great shock of dark hair, that seemed to be growing straight out of his head, but every which way, and he had just given up on controlling it. He had deep blue eyes, that couldn't quite really meet yours – just when you'd think you were locking on, he'd look away. So it was very difficult to get a feel for this guy. He was definitely not your conventional sort of travelling American. He didn't seem to notice the cold, in spite of only being in shirt sleeves, and he just felt – well, *weird*.

“We're going east. New York.”

“Darn” he says. Not looking good here.

“Why? You going west?”

“No, I’m going east, but I’m going to Washington, DC, and I don’t think that’s very close to New York.”

We looked at each other with mutual agreement. “We don’t care. We’ll ride to the DC turnoff. At least it will get us out of here, and most of the way across Pennsylvania.”

“Are you sure? Cause I could sure use some company.”

“Are you kidding? We’ve been here all night. We’d take a ride to the next exit.”

“OK, well . . .” We didn’t understand why he was hesitating.

“Is there a problem?”

“No. I guess not.” And then he looked at me with the oddest look. “My car is kind of funny. It works, but it’s been acting funny.”

We looked at each other again. “We don’t care. Whatever. We’ll go with you.”

“OK. My name’s Richard.”

“Hi. I’m LR and this is Darlene.” We shook hands and headed out to the parking lot.

You have to remember here, that it was 1970, and the half-dozen or so cars that graced the lot at 5 in the morning were all ginormous by today’s standards. And there, sitting between a 16 ft long Pontiac and an equally long Chevrolet, was this – “car.” It could have easily fit into the trunk of the Pontiac, or the back seat of the Chevy.

Not to mention its condition. It looked like it had spent the last decade either rotting in a barn or climbing Pike’s Peak. It did not look like it could do 30, much less 60.

So THIS was going to take us across the Pennsylvania mountains?

He apologized profusely for it, but assured us that it worked, and it would get us across Pennsylvania.

“Are you sure?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Well, like I said, it’s been acting funny. But I think it will work. And - ” and here he seemed to be weighing his words – “it would be a good thing for you to come along.”

We exchange another look.

“What do you mean?”

“Why don’t we just go?” And then he looked at us with sort of a twinkle in his eye. “Are you lovebirds? You look like lovebirds.”

And there was something so sweet that suddenly bubbled out of him, that when we exchanged looks this time, it turned all goo-gaw and giggly.

“Yeah, I guess we are.”

“Then you can ride together in the back.”

“You have got to be kidding. Both of us? In there?”

Without ceremony or hesitation, he grabbed a couple of bags, put them in front, grabbed one of us in each arm, and the next thing I know we’re squeezed in tight and cozy and he’s starting up the roller skate.

It sounded kind of funny, but he put it in gear, and by golly it moved. And it actually got up to about 50. It took a really, really long time for it to get to speed, way longer than the ramp, and I had to wonder how he would get that car on the highway in traffic, but at the moment we were so happy to be moving again, that I don’t think we really minded. We were rolling once again.

We tried to make conversation, but it never seemed to get anywhere. He didn’t want to talk about himself, so we were reluctant to tell him much about us. He was from somewhere in Indiana, and was going to Washington, DC, to see his mother, and that was all we could get out of him. So we told him we were college students going to New York on a school trip or something, and just as we were settling into a quiet ride, the Saab starts to sputter and kick and the next minute it’s completely dead and coasting onto the shoulder.

“Uh, what’s wrong?”

“This is the funny I was telling you about.” And he turns around and looks at me, and for a moment his eyes stay with mine and they seem to bore straight into my skull. And then he turned back around. “It goes for a while and then it stops. Now if we just wait ten minutes or so, it will go again.”

“Ten minutes?”

“Yeah. It’s worked every time before.”

“But we’ve only been driving 15 minutes.”

“Are you in a hurry?”

“Well . . .”

So we sat in silence for the rest of the ten minutes. Darlene and I were starting to have serious doubts about this “ride,” but at that point what was there to do but wait it out?

He looks at his watch and taps out the final ten seconds on the steering wheel with his fingers. Then he turned the key and it started right up. He turned to us with a big smile: “See?”

So we went on down the road, for about ten minutes, and then the Saab spits and sputters and dies and we coast to the side of the road again.

“Ten minutes!” He announces, as if he’s a railroad conductor. He catches my eye in the rear view mirror, and again, just for a few seconds, his eyes bore into my very soul. I broke away.

“But it only ran for 10 minutes!”

“I thought you said you weren’t in a hurry.”

“Well, even if we aren’t, going ten minutes and stopping ten minutes isn’t going to get us very far.”

“It’ll get us just as far, just not quite as fast.”

“Not quite as fast?” But Darlene shushed me and I shut up. Now we were starting to get seriously alarmed. That ten minutes took about three hours to pass.

Again he taps out the final ten seconds on the steering wheel, and again it starts right up. But this time we barely get going – it’s not even five minutes – and the Saab is spitting and sputtering and dies once again.

This time I’ve had it, and I whisper to Darlene: “We’ll do better to just put our thumbs out. It’s starting to get light, let’s just go –” this all in a whisper that I know he can’t hear.

And as if I had spoken to him, he responds, “You won’t do any better sticking your thumbs out here. Besides it’s illegal.” And then he turns around again, locks eyes with me, and I feel like he’s reaching right into my head and keeping me from moving. “Besides,” he says, right into my eyes, into my brain, “you know how to fix this car.”

Well, this was a little much for me, and I don’t know what weirdness he’s doing with his eyes, but I don’t like it, and I’m starting to get seriously worried, because it felt like he had some kind of *power* in his eyes – it was totally weird and very scary, and I just said,

“No, I’m sorry, that’s impossible. I don’t work on cars at all, much less weirdo imports.” And he doesn’t release me from his eye-grip, but says, “No, you work on motorcycles.”

Now THAT got my attention, because we had not mentioned motorcycles, and there was no way on god’s green earth that he could know that. But he didn’t release me, and I still felt like I was in some kind of grip, and I said, “How do you know that?” and he says “don’t worry about how I know, but I do. I don’t know anything about any kind of motors, but I know you know about the kind of motor that is in this car.” “I have only owned two-stroke motorcycles. Cars do not have two-stroke motors.” So Richard says to that: “I really don’t have a clue what you’re talking about. But I know in my heart that you know how to fix this motor. Will you please at least look at it?” Now, since I was being asked to look at it while I was still in the grip of this guy’s bottomless eyes, there was no waffling this time, so I said, “Sure. I know there’s nothing I’m going to be able to do, but let me look at it so we can finally establish that and then maybe you’ll let us just get on our way.” “OK. If you can’t fix it, you can go.”

So with that we extricate ourselves from the roller skate, with much squeezing and grunting, out into the first grey light of dawn. I go around to the front of the car, he pops the hood, and I could not believe my eyes. This Saab was powered by a rotary, three cylinder, two stroke motor. On top of everything else, it had a cartoon motor! It was the silliest piece of engineering I had ever seen. But, nonetheless, one I understood.

I laughed out loud. Darlene saw that I knew and she laughed out loud. He didn’t see what was funny, but kept pointing at it, and saying, “You know? Right? You know what’s wrong? Right? You can tell?” And finally I stopped laughing and said, “Yeah, Richard, I have a clue about this motor. If it was my motorcycle, and doing this, it would likely be a mixture screw coming out, causing more and more fuel to go into the motor, drowning it out in successively shorter stints. So let me see if I can find a loose mixture screw here . . .” and sure enough, the very simple carburetor had two adjustment screws, and one of them was so loose it was about to fall out. I screwed it all the way in, then backed it out a turn, and said, “Let’s try this. It may be too lean or still too rich, but we can fine tune it as we go along.”

Well, the little beat up Saab started right up, and we knew I had improved the situation right away because it accelerated three times faster than it had before. It ran 5 minutes. Ten. Fifteen. We’re all looking at our watches. And after it went 20 minutes, which was longer than it had gone yet, the mood in the car changed considerably.

“I knew you could fix it. I knew when I first saw you.”

“OK, Richard, how did you know?”

“Well, I see things.” Our big smiles are turning into another look exchanged between us.

“What do you mean?”

"It's hard for me to talk about. But I feel that you are nice people and that I can tell you."

We're looking at each other, and she's giving me a Why not?

"Sure, Richard. You can trust us."

"I know I can. I saw it when I saw you two sitting in the hall. I was driving and I was feeling really lonely and as I came up on that rest area, I could feel that someone was there who would be nice to me and fix my car."

"OK. So you knew we were there. . ." I didn't know what else to say.

Darlene chimed in, and there was a soft tone in her voice, almost motherly, that surprised me. "How do you know these things, Richard."

"I just do. Whether I want to or not. And sometimes seeing into people's heads is upsetting to me." He turned and looked at us, gave us a quick shot of that brain rattling look. "When I said I was from Indiana, that was only partly true." He stopped. We could see he was strggling. "I was coming from Indiana, but I'm not from there. I - I live in a hospital there. Or I was living in a hospital there. . . They released me."

"Well, congratulations. It's always good to be out of the hospital. What was wrong?" And Darlene touched my arm, and gave me a look to stop me from saying anything else.

"It was an insane asylum."

"I knew that," said Darlene.

He laughed out loud, and started jumping up and down in his seat, making the roller skate suddenly start lurching. "I knew it! I knew it! I knew it!"

"All right, all right, Richard, stop jumping!" And he did.

But he kept laughing. "I knew you knew it. But I didn't know if you'd admit it. And you did!" He was suddenly Mr. Party.

I turned to Darlene. "How did you know?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just did."

"Yeah! That's exactly it!" He piped right in. He was really excited. "It's like all of a sudden you see these images and you don't even know where they're coming from but they're there and they're always right!"

"Well, not always," Darlene said.

“No,” he said, suddenly serious. “Not for you, cause you don’t have it as bad as me.”

We pondered that for a moment. Then Darlene said, “How bad do you have it?”

“Bad. That’s why they put me in the hospital and shocked me. They thought it would get rid of it. Stop it. But it didn’t. It just made everything – weirder.”

“They shocked you?” I couldn’t stop myself from asking. “As in shock treatments?”

“Oh yes. Lots of them. Regularly. Finally I figured out how to make them think it made a difference. That’s how I got out.”

Darlene: “You faked them out so you could get out.”

He turned, and his eyes glowed with glee. “Yup. I sure did.”

“Road, Richard! ROAD!” And he turned just as the front wheel hit the shoulder, and after a little bouncing, we were back on the road.

I had to ask. “So, uh, Richard. Where did you get this car?”

“One of the people at the hospital who I really liked had it in a barn. It had been there a long time, but she thought it would work and said I could use it. She was really nice about it. And it worked pretty good for a while.” So it HAD been in a barn.

Well, after that, we really hit it off. Darlene had told me she had had a lot of psychic experiences, but I never thought anything of it. We all have weird stuff happen to us. But to Richard, who seemed to feel much more of a psychic pull from Darlene, she was like a long lost relative, and they were instant buds. Just like that, the disastrous night, the dilapidated roller skate, the break down, the weird guy – all of that just transformed into a fun family trip.

We didn’t really talk much more about it, except to joke and make light of it, but when we stopped to get some breakfast, Darlene asked him, “How much of us did you see, when you were standing next to us in the hallway?”

He looked away, got kind of coy, and said, “Are you sure you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“All of you.”

“All of us.”

He looked away and then back. “You know when I asked if you were lovebirds?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I didn’t need to ask you, cause I knew.”

“You mean – you saw us – together?”

Again he looked away, clearly embarrassed, and nodded reluctantly.

Darlene laughed out loud. “Oh, that’s so funny! You actually saw us – doing it?”

“Wait a minute.” Mr. Speedy here finally caught on. “Are you saying that when you first saw us, you had, like, a vision of us making love?”

“I’m really sorry. I don’t TRY to see these things. They’re just there.”

“Holy crap,” I say.

“That’s wonderful!” says Darlene, clapping her hands with delight.

“No it isn’t! It’s awful! It’s embarrassing. Just imagine meeting somebody and as they shake hands with you, you see them making love to someone. Or what’s worse, you see them hitting somebody with that hand, doing something awful. It’s horrible. . . It’s a curse.” There was a pause while we pondered that. “That’s why I was in the hospital.” There was nothing to say to that. Because he could see into people’s heads, they had put him in an asylum and given him shock treatments. That had done nothing. Our hearts went out to him.

We didn’t talk about it any more. We sang, and laughed, and told stories, and just had a great time together. The roller skate kept working, and we didn’t have to stop again. When the turn off for Washington, DC came up, he kept on going. He had decided to take us to our destination, and if it meant he got to his mother’s the next day, so be it. He was having too much fun, and we deserved it. So he drove that tiny little excuse for a car right into Times Square, and let us off at the steps of the Travelers Aid society. We had an amazing time, food for another story. But we did find a way to take a bus home.

We exchanged phone numbers and addresses with Richard, but we never heard from him again. I did get a letter from his mother thanking me for fixing his car, and offering me her home to stay in if I was ever in Washington, DC. Of course, I never took her up on that.

But Richard’s influence on me was profound. My quest for “How it All Works” suddenly had to account for a guy who really could see into people’s heads. Not someone whom I had heard or read about or seen on television, but someone who had looked into my own head. I knew it was real.

I wanted to ask my Catholic tutors how they would account for that. But not really. I knew what their answer would be.

But my new cosmology would account for it. Now it would have to.