



The Last Parking Lot

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The Last Parking Lot

'They say it's the last place on earth, yes, *the* last place where you can do it. No, no, I don't know why they let it exist, I just know that it does exist,' Phil said. 'Yes, yes, of course I can take you there, but that doesn't mean... okay, where are you?'

The door buzzer buzzed.

'Just a moment, Dawn, there's someone at the door. Oh it's you.'

Dawn's smiling face appeared in the door monitor. He opened the door.

'You're keen,' he said, when he'd opened the door. 'Why didn't you say you were on your way over here?'

'Thought I'd save the surprise,' she said, stepping inside. 'Come on, don't keep me guessing, when are you going to take me to this wonderful place you were talking about.'

The door closed behind her with a soft whisper and Phil waved her toward the kitchen.

'Today, if you like,' he said, his back to her. A big smile crossed his face.

They'd been dating for a year, and this was going to be the best night they'd had, if it all went to plan.

'You're kidding me, right?' she said, slapping him on the back playfully.

He turned, shrugged. 'Me, kid? When have I ever done that?'

'You're not pulling my leg are you?'

'Me, pull your—'

She jumped forward and took his hands in hers, holding them up, threatening to make him slap himself.

'I warn you, I'm deadly,' she said.

He rolled his eyes. 'Oh, who will save me from this brute?' he said, in a high pitched voice.

She let him have it for that little jibe.

A few slaps later and they sat together at the kitchen table.

'How did you find this place?' Dawn said.

'Accident,' he said. 'The AI in the car went screwy and it took me down a wrong road. I don't know, maybe the place did it to the AI, can't be sure.'

'And *they* were there?'

He was loving every moment. 'Hundreds of them,' he said, 'all lined up, perfect. Like some kind of holo-history, but you could go up to them and touch, really touch them.'

She giggled.

'I can't believe there are still any left. It's like finding a dinosaur, a real one, not one of those miniature ones they have in the park.'

'Those are pretty good,' he said, playing it cool.

'Oh yeah, they're really good. Dinosaurs were massive, they weren't the size of dogs. You have to wear the special glasses just to make them look like they used to.'

'The glasses are good too, but expensive.'

'Stop it,' she said, 'I want to hear about this place, everything, the smallest detail.'

He wasn't about to spoil the surprise for her by going over everything he'd seen, even if he wanted to. No, he'd promised her something special for their anniversary, and there was nothing more special than this.

'I wasn't there too long,' he said. 'I couldn't tell you everything I saw.'

'Tease,' she said.

'You want me to go through it all and ruin it for you?'

A pensive look stole the smile from her face. 'No, but, I do want to know—'

'I'll tell you this, the guy who runs the place is like a dinosaur.'

'The small ones in the park?'

'No, he's a big man, with a big beard, and he...' Phil cupped his hand over his mouth. 'Swears,' he said in a whisper.

'No,' she said.

He put his hand over his heart. 'Honest, no lie,' he said. 'That's not all he does.'

'You're teasing me again,' she said, 'stop it.'

'No tease. This guy is like something out of the holo museum, but for real. I thought maybe he was holo when I first saw him, but no, he's the real deal.'

'How?' she said.

He shrugged.

'Beats me. How is any of this possible? Rules are rules, and this guy, that place breaks them all.'

'I can't believe it exists.'

'You will, once I take you there.' A sly smile spread on his face.

'What is it? What are you smiling at?'

'Well, you know about... you've seen the histories haven't you?'

'Of course I have, why?'

He winked at her.

She leaned forward.

'Really?'

He nodded.

'Just like that?'

His hand went back to his heart again.

'No sanctions, no protections, no simulators, all real. I saw them.'

'You didn't, did you?'

He nodded.

'And they were...' she didn't finish, she didn't have to, they could both fill in the blanks from then on in.

'What about the Governors?' she said.

'Do you really think a place like that would have any law hanging around?'

'No, I... well, I just can't believe it's possible.'

'You'll see, soon enough.' He tapped the table a few times and the time waterfalled upwards to shine above them. 'Okay, we're three-eight-six beats now, we'll go as soon as it reaches six-hundred, how does that sound?'

'Good,' she said, then she got a worried look on her face. 'But what about the AI, the car?'

'Already thought of that. I programmed the destination in after the AI went on the blink. So I can just go back there whenever I want to.'

'Clever,' she said.

'It is our anniversary after all, nothing's too big.'

She leaned in across the table, he countered. Their lips almost touched, then they pulled apart.

'Monitors,' he said, pointing at the house.

'Sure, it's okay, I understand.'

'You're not disappointed?'

'How could I be? Tonight we'll... .' She winked.

'Yes, yes we will,' he said.

The AI's voice was not man, nor woman, but somewhere between. Complaints didn't have to have a gender to be understood.

'Sir, we're going in the wrong direction,' the car said. 'We're dangerously off course.'

Dawn looked at him with a worried face.

He held up a hand. 'It's okay,' he whispered. 'Nothing to worry about.'

'Sir, I'm afraid I'll have to report any off-course location to—'

Phil put his hand on the screen.

'Override,' he said.

'Sir, please supply a breath to confirm this request.'

Phil leaned in and breathed.

'You are acknowledged. Please state your override request.'

'Stay to course eighty-thirty-three, please.'

Phil held his breath.

It had worked once before, he hoped it would work now. There was only another hundred yards until the little dirt road appeared and they could celebrate their anniversary in the style he'd promised.

'Sir, that course is outside all sanctioned travel routes. Please re-confirm your request.'

Dawn leaned forward.

'It's not going to work,' she whispered.

'It is, just give it a moment.'

Phil settled himself in the seat and cleared his throat.

'Stay to course eight-thirty-three, please,' he said.

The mag-striped road veered sharply to the left just after it met the little dirt road. If the car didn't comply and soon they would overshoot their destination. There was no turning back once they'd gone beyond.

'Sir, I'm afraid your request does not comply with governance and I will have to—'

'Do something,' Dawn whispered.

There was only one thing he could do.

'Fire!' Phil shouted.

'What?' Dawn said.

'Fire! The car is on fire!' he winked at her.

'Yes, the car is on fire! What will we do?' she said, her voice utterly unconvincing.

Didn't matter how good of an actor she was, the car was convinced.

'Initiating emergency stop. Please exit the vehicle while the emergency is dealt with,' the car said.

The doors opened.

Phil and Dawn stepped out onto the side of the road.

'What now?' Dawn asked.

'We walk,' he said.

'Walk?'

'Yes.'

'I don't think I've walked... I can't remember the last time I walked anywhere.'

He took her arm in his and he pointed to the dusty road.

'It'll all be part of the surprise. Like it really was back then, what do you say?'

She grinned. 'Living history,' she said.

'Better than any holo-history, that's for sure.'

And they set off, leaving the car and the phantom fire behind them.

‘And where do you think you two are going?’

The big man, with a big beard stood out in front of them, blocking the way.

Dawn’s face scrunched with worry.

Phil patted her on the hand.

‘I was here the other night,’ he said. ‘I’ve come to see—’

‘See what?’

‘You know, the... ’

‘There’s nothing out here, kid, nothing at all.’

‘But I saw—’

The big man walked forward, it was like watching a boulder about to fall upon a small stone.

‘You saw nothing, understand me? Nothing at all. Now go.’

Phil backpedalled, carrying Dawn with him.

‘What do we do now?’ she whispered into his ear.

‘I think he’s worried we’re governors, maybe we can—’

‘You two don’t hear too well, do you? This is private land, I don’t like—’

Phil had an idea, and the idea tickled his stomach.

There was only one way to prove to this man that he was not a governor, that he wasn’t a spy. He had to do it with words.

‘Screw it, man,’ he said, the words at first uncomfortable in his mouth. ‘Those bastard Governors are ruining everything.’

Dawn giggled at hearing the banned words.

‘What was that?’ the big man said.

‘You heard me, fatty, can’t go no place without those bastards getting in the way. Not even out here.’

The big man ran his tongue across his teeth as he looked them both over.

‘A person talks like that can get in serious trouble, you know.’

Phil tried to be casual, but he hadn’t had much practice.

'Like I care. Screw the Governors, stupid bastards ruin everything.'

'Yeah, stupid... bastards,' Dawn chipped in.

The big man smiled.

'Good try, kid. You almost sounded convincing.'

'Did I?' Phil said.

'You were getting there, just a little off.'

'So can we come in?' Phil asked, his voice rising with hope.

'Please?' Dawn added.

The big man glanced over his shoulder. 'Why you so interested?' he asked. 'You're young, you probably have everything you could ever want in the world. Why bother to come out here and risk all that just to see what's here?'

Phil knew the perfect answer.

'Because it's real,' he said.

'That it is,' the big man said. 'As real as it gets nowadays.'

'So can we come in?' Phil said.

‘Please?’ Dawn added.

The big man held up a big hand with a big finger pointed at the both of them.

‘First, you don’t be saying please or thank you, got that?’

They nodded.

‘Second, once you’re in there it’s a whole different world. You’ve got to act like those people did back then. No exceptions.’

‘Act?’ Phil asked.

‘Sure, act. You do what you want, you go where you want, you say whatever you like. There’s no Governors, no AI, no chips, no watching eyes. That’s how it works. Agreed?’

‘Sure,’ Phil said.

‘Yes, yes, thank – yes,’ Dawn said.

The big man stood aside and waved the way for them to the end of the path.

‘Welcome to the year nineteen hundred and ninety two,’ he said.

They skipped their way down the path until they reached a big wooden barrier painted white and yellow.

‘What do we do now?’ Dawn said.

‘I read about this, or maybe I saw it somewhere.’

‘About what?’

‘Well, when they drove the cars themselves, when they parked them, they had to take a ticket and that would tell them how long they could stay. See,’ he pointed to the little yellow block beside the barrier, ‘that’s where you get your ticket from.’

‘But we don’t have a car?’ Dawn said. ‘They’re all inside already aren’t they? You did come out here before, didn’t you Phil? You weren’t just making it up?’

He nodded. ‘Not this way though. Must have been on the other side, I came in through the woods. There was none of this.’

‘So what do we do?’

He scratched at his chin. 'Wait, I remember something else I saw.'

'What was—'

He grabbed her hand and ran forward, once they reached the barrier he put both his hands on the wood and vaulted over.

'Come on, join me,' he said.

'Are you sure? Maybe we'll get into—'

'Do what we want, say what we want, remember?' he said.

Timidly she put her hands on the barrier and climbed over.

And then they were on the parking lot. Grey, environmentally unfriendly concrete was laid out before them. A hundred or more cars sat side by side before them.

Dawn shivered.

'I can't believe this is really happening.'

'It is, it is,' he said, 'come on.'

He took her hand and like two children from another age, another less concerned time, they ran toward the cars.

‘Which one do we pick?’ she said.

‘Doesn’t matter. Any,’ he said.

For five minutes they ran their hands across polished metal, across real glass and real chrome until they found a long brown Ford and opened the doors.

Soon they were on the back seat, wrapped in each other’s arms.

‘This is really what they did back then?’ Dawn asked. ‘They didn’t have to get permission, no sanctions?’

He nodded.

‘It was a different time,’ he said.

‘I wish it was like that now,’ she said.

‘It is,’ he said, and reached in under her blouse. ‘Happy Anniversary.’ She kissed him full on the lips as all around them engines purred, and windows steamed.

And history came to life.

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