

Vanity Plates

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This one time I told my producer friend about an idea for a reality TV show. It would be called “Car-Compactor” and one lucky audience member would get to choose whether or not to press a button, and that button would cause a person and their car to get crushed by a compactor. But here’s the thing: they would have to make their decision based purely on the car’s custom number plate. And after the crushing, the show would talk to all the crushed person’s friends and family, and see if they thought their colleague deserved to be crushed. If the general consensus was that they did deserve such a fate, then the button presser would win.

My good friend Lucy (the producer) thought it was a stupid idea, because I couldn't decide what would happen if the button-presser chose wrong, or work out where to find people willing to be potentially crushed. The entire exchange took place in a tacky cafe of Lucy's choosing. A smallish place, trying desperately to appear warm despite the clear smog of decadent impersonality created by the 20-something-year-old tattooed staff. My long black was bitter, and Lucy's lasagna cold. I tried my best to deter Lucy from ordering a meal by reminding her that she didn't really fit her 'new' Sportscraft blouse from last season. As always, she brushed the statement off and proceeded to add far too much sugar to her tea, perhaps out of spite. We didn't discuss my gameshow idea further, instead she asked, without any real interest, about my life and family. All I really wanted to talk about was how the frequency in which she wore her same old outfit expressed an apathy in appearance which I took personally. Fortunately, Lucy is 'bubbly' (as girls of her size usually are) so I enjoy her company (despite her appearance). I just hope that nobody is judging me by association.

Eventually, I left the cafe, and thought about Lucy on the walk home. I did some ironing, and I thought about her more. I hate

myself for it, but I think about Lucy a lot — not in a creepy way or anything. Three other guys live with me, and I do the ironing for the whole house; mostly I do it because it allows me to justify the somewhat high rent I charge them, but I also like the insight I get from it. You can tell a lot about a person by their clothes. Justin, a first-year engineering student only wears cheap T-shirts with pop culture references on them or button-downs from 'YD' which, despite my best folding, are always more faded every-time I iron them. Samm, who should be first year but dropped out to start a band (and who didn't laugh when I suggested that he would have more success if he dropped the pretentious extra "m" in his name) only wears corduroy pants and 'Gazman' white shirts, which aren't especially high-class, but aren't nearly as grunge as he wants to appear. Michael (third-year paramedic science) doesn't seem to own any clothes, and is constantly borrowing from myself and the other two. They are a dirty, rowdy bunch, with crowded rooms and terrible drinking habits, but they pay rent and stay out of my room.

This one time, maybe two weeks ago, I was walking along a fairly lonely overpass on the way to work. Only, I had never walked this overpass, and had caught an entirely unfamiliar tram to

get there. I was listening to the fifth song on my iPod, meaning I should, on a normal day, be two songs away from work. I hadn't seen Lucy in some time, because she said she was busy, or at least I presumed that's why she wasn't returning my texts. Personally, I have always made it my business not to be busy, but to simply appear so (in order to deter customers). I was glad the overpass was relatively abandoned, because on the tram ride over everyone was either looking at me or at my rifle, and I hate it when people I don't know look at me. It was a cheap bolt action that I had in a gun cabinet for a long time. I didn't know how to clean it, but because of the summer my uncles tried to 'teach me to be a man', I knew how to use it. I stuck the barrel in between the bars of the hand-rail and looked down at all eight lanes of traffic coming and going through my periscope sight. After a few minutes I worked out the easiest way was to pick a car, and then line them up in my sights, because I couldn't move the barrel too much. It was dark, but the custom plates stood out against the normal ones. Everyone was looking at me, and one little girl even waved so I waved back — but when I took my hand off the trigger a black Holden with the plate B1G BoY got under me, so I didn't take my hand off the trigger again. I let many Volkswagens and Ford

Fiestas with ROD 93 or L1SA 21 go by. Ford Fiestas always make me think of Lucy. The last time we met for brunch I was drunk and offered to buy her one, 'cause she said her tire was flat, but she just stormed off.

I had underestimated how hard it was to shoot moving targets, especially when you can't move your barrel much because of the stupidly narrow handrails. People sped up when they saw me which made it even harder. A Rolls Royce with the plate NICKEL written in gold paint sped towards me but I missed. The bullet hit an exit sign, and I saw it ricochet away from where it could do harm. Maybe I didn't account for bullet drop, or the Coriolis effect or something. Thinking back though, I'm glad I missed, 'cause I shot mainly because the driver was fat and ugly, which probably wasn't his own fault. By this point the police had blocked off the overpass. Lots of people were yelling at me, but they just didn't understand the game. I saw an L plate with the number plate LUCY 98 and before I could think I shot and I saw her face explode. Blood covered the windscreen of the little Nissan Pulsar and as its family rolled off the road I wondered if I'd hit my sales target this week.

I asked Lucy to come to my court date (by which I mean my producer friend, not the dead learner driver). I also tried to make

it very clear that a court date was not an actual date, as my past efforts to move our relationship forward had adverse effects. My lawyer said the more people that came for me, the more the jury would feel sorry for me. I said if she came I'd stop using my phone calls to ring up her and her friends. I even sent a letter which on re-reading could be seen as threatening — but I apologised for that to her voicemail. Regardless she didn't come, which made the courtroom decidedly tedious. I couldn't keep my eyes open half the time, and when I was awake I just stared at the beige ceiling, and wondered if Lucy was crying for me. She probably was, which explained why she didn't attend. She told me once in confidence she can't stand people seeing her crying, which I thought was an important step in our blossoming relationship; her ability to put her trust in me. The prosecution kept going on about how I was a monster, and I how I destroyed a family, and eventually even the judge joined in. He kept talking about how the girl's mum and dad died in the crash, and how her brother was in 'critical condition', which surprised me because we'd been in court for so long, and people are only critical for a short time. Apparently the Nissan had rolled into oncoming traffic, which I don't remember at all, and hardly seems like my fault. But according

to my lawyer, that was hardly a defence, probably because it wasn't in Latin. My lawyer was an idiot, who focused more on teaching me how to invoke sympathy from my little "accused" box, than actually telling my side of the story.

Everyone went on about these facts that had nothing to do with my innocence, like how it was the girl's sixteenth birthday, or how I was legally allowed to own a gun, or how all my friends in the witness box thought I was "just a normal guy" and they'd "never suspect anything like this". In the end the judge delivered a very powerful and self-involved speech in which he explained to everyone in very jargonistic, unnecessary words just how evil I was, and then invited the public to vote. After enough of them texted "DEATH" to a 1300 number, it was decided I should be killed. They reinstated capital punishment just for me, and me alone.

As a final touch, they decided it would be quite ironic if I was to be shot, which annoyed me, because it wasn't.

I wasn't the public's favourite figure so I didn't spend long on 'death row' (which was really just a dramatic name for a cell in a low security correctional facility, filled with plenty of actual criminals who would see the outside before me). For my last meal they said I could have anything I wanted, and as much

of it as I liked, but because I never made a formal request, I got cold SpaghettiO's. I ate them all, and drank the juice too. Soon the warden came and took me to a small white room with a big mirror. The idea of someone coming to watch me was upsetting, made almost disgusting by the fact it was an execution. Then I noticed the camera in the upper left corner of the room, and I realised how many people were watching from home. Because of the mirror, and the camera, and the stage fright, I graciously accepted the warden's offer of a blindfold, and then everything was dark. I asked when the firing squad would get here, hoping they would take their time, and even suggested they double-checked that their rifles were clean, which is apparently very important, but as I knew, not necessary. The warden explained there would be no firing squad, and that I would be shot by an electronically programmed gun in the wall. I was impressed. I hadn't seen any gun, or hole, or anything. I bet whoever shoots me won't get caught. The warden managed to restrain himself from enjoying his explanation of how pistons would line up the fatal shot so that in

entered my shoulder, somehow managing to pierce my heart, left lung, right kidney, and several other organs. He also said it was okay if wanted to vomit. He asked for my last request, and I told him I'd like music to play while I die. He sighed and I heard him leave. While he was gone I took a micro-step back, in the hope maybe the bullet would miss my lung, or maybe hit the wrong kidney. When he returned he asked for my final statement.

"I think I've worked it out."
I hastily explained. "The people who choose wrong become the people in the cars."

Then I heard the door close, and I heard some pistons re-adjusting. The warden's radio started playing a car ad, with a jingle that in no way resembled 'music'. The green light on the camera flicked to red. "Censors won't allow this bit on TV" chuckled the warden with a nod. Then, a gunshot, and I felt my heart explode.

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