

## A DIFFERENT CAR

"It's like a different car," Lissie said. "I mean, normally I can't even tell when you've cleaned it but -"

She gestured at the interior of the car.

"It's like a different car," she said again.

"I just had the gold valet service," I told her. "You know, spent extra. They hoovered up all the -"

But Lissie had lost interest in the conversation and was looking at her phone. Which was fine by me.

The thing is, it *was* a different car.

About a week before, I had been in a small bust-up. Nothing too bad, just scraped the side of the car on a concrete pillar in an underground car park, but it annoyed me. The week before, I'd rear-ended a parked car and cracked my bumper. A few days before that, I'd smashed a tail light when I reversed into a gate post. Little things, but they all added up. And after the car park incident, where I lost some of the plastic trim on the left-hand passenger side, the car wasn't looking too great.

I booked the car in with whatever the people who fix bodywork are called and drove round to the industrial estate where their workshop was located, next to a second-hand car lot which I presumed was connected to the workshop place. The man came out. He was small and bald and he was wiping his hands on a dirty piece of cloth.

"Bit of a scratch," he said in a friendly enough voice, but I wasn't listening. Across the road was a car, parked in the middle of the second-hand lot. It was the same as my car.

"Yes," I said, just to say something.

The man began to walk around my car. I continued to look at the other car. It was the same colour as mine and the same - I think the word is "marque", or it might be "model." Either way, it was exactly alike in every way. I had no doubt the number plate was different, but that could be fixed.

"I want to buy that car," I said, pointing at the lot. The man turned around. "The one that's the same as this one," I said.

"What about -" he said.

"Can we do a trade in?" I asked.

The man shrugged, like he didn't see why not. "I'll get my brother," he said.

I changed the number plates as soon as I got home. Then, even though it was pretty clean, I took the car to be valeted.

"Did you get new batteries for the remote?" Lissie asked as she was changing channels.

"Yes," I said. "Gave it a rub with a wet wipe, too."

"Great," she said. "Finally."

The old remote was in the bin. I was glad. I'd taken a dislike to it, and I didn't think new batteries were the cure.

The cat was next. I had never enjoyed his company, although we both seemed to like it when I stroked him. Replacing the cat was easy - he was small and black and there were plenty like him at the rescue place - but the problem was that while the new cat was fine and with some sedatives mixed into his food quite relaxed about his new home, the old cat didn't understand what had happened and he kept coming back.

I tried closing the windows so he couldn't get in, but he just hung around outside, mewling. I was surprised: he'd never shown any signs of caring about me before. I supposed he just liked being in the warm and knowing where his food bowl was. I solved the problem by putting him in his little cat cage and driving to the next town, where I released him into someone's garden. That seemed to do it. For a while, I was concerned about his fate, but I read somewhere how cats go from house to house, begging for food. I was pretty sure he was that kind of cat. Either way, I never saw him again, so mission accomplished.

The dog was more of a problem. He was a mongrel and I had no idea what breeds he was composed of. So I evolved a plan. It was a little complicated, but it was predicated on the idea that people liked him, and would often stop and talk to me about how much they liked him. I would take him for a walk in the park, for example, and a woman would come up and say, "What a beautiful dog!" and we'd exchange a few words about him, and then part. It was curious: none of these people were interested in talking to me, I sensed, even though they were people and I was a person, but show them a dog that's not actually crawling with fleas and rabid and they cooed their faces off.

My plan was simple. I had noticed that people had a very limited range of comments about the dog. Normally they would say that he was beautiful - and I could see what they meant, with his golden curly fur and his agreeable temperament and very waggy tail - and frequently they'd ask, "How old is he?" or "What's his name?". And quite often, given his obvious mixed origins, some people would say, "What sort of dog is he?"

These were the people I was looking for. If someone asked me what sort of dog he was, I would say, "What kind of dog do you think he is?"

It was, to be honest, a laborious process. Some people just shrugged, others looked at me oddly - but in the end a pattern emerged, and it was clear that most people thought he was a mixture of two or three common breeds. Armed with this canine vox pop, I was able to go on my computer and look at images of dogs from this hypothetical gene pool. At first, I had no luck - unsurprisingly, really, given the almost random co-ordinates - but then I began to notice a few similarities within certain groups, and finally, after some months, tracked down not just the exact mix I was looking for, but a breeder who specialized in that particular variety.

I made an appointment to see her and, after a few dull minutes looking at puppies, I indicated that I actually wanted an adult dog.

She frowned. "We only sell the puppies," she said.

I named a figure. She led me into her house. There were a couple of older dogs lying by the fire.

"That one," I said.

"Him? But he's - "

I doubled my price. She put a lead on the dog and I gave her the money. As I left, I heard a child crying.

Perhaps it was my conscience nagging me but that night I drove back to the breeder's house and let my old dog out into their garden.

"It's not you," Lissie said.

"Pardon?"

"It's not you," she said, "It's me."

I stared at her. I didn't understand what she was saying

"I'm leaving you," she said.

To be honest, when I thought about it, I wasn't really surprised. With all that was going on in my increasingly busy life, I had hardly been able to spend any time with Lissie.

"I say it's not you," she said, "But you've been very withdrawn. You're not yourself."

I looked down at the floor, which seemed to be the appropriate response. I was still looking down when I heard the door close and her keys drop through the letter box.

"It's not you."

Lissie's words haunted me.

They continue to haunt me.

I don't resent her for saying it, let me make that clear. She understood me more than anyone else. That's the sad part. She knew me better than anyone else, and even though she didn't guess what was happening - how could she? - she could sense that things had changed.

I knew something had to be done.

I thought about what that "something" might be for a long time. I considered changing the house, but in the end, I saw how absurd that was: no-one could demolish an entire house and rebuild it from scratch without people noticing. And even if you could somehow replicate the old house in secret - maybe enclosing the whole construction site in a kind of hangar - questions would be asked.

No, she was right. Lissie had seen through me, and one day she'd wake up and realise who I really was. There was no way I could let that happen.

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It's not easy to replace a human being. Apart from the simple issue of physical resemblance, there's the matter of identity. Memories. Experiences.

Facial expressions and ways of doing things. A replacement doesn't just have to act like the person they're replacing – they have to *be* them. But it can be done. You can find someone who looks the same, and surgery will do the rest. You can get the documents and papers you need. And a person can start afresh in a different town, thereby avoiding too many difficult questions.

I made a checklist.

Friends: they can be avoided.

Family members: none, fortunately.

Work: a few phone calls and no questions asked again.

The only hard part is the actual substitution. The disposal and replacement of a human being.

Which is where you come in.

I found you online, obviously, using a kind of image comparison software. We look about, what, 85% the same, and the plastic surgeon can do the rest. I've transferred you all my details and all my savings – there was a lot of money in that house, too – and if I'm honest, the details of my life are pretty easy to remember.

All you have to do is go through with it. I've researched your background pretty thoroughly, and it's clear to me that you could do with a fresh start. Which is what I'm offering you. Just sign this piece of paper – it's not actually legally binding, but I do have people in place to enforce it should you get cold feet – and you'll be me. Obviously, there will be a period of transition. You'll be me, and for a short time, I'll also be me. But don't worry – it won't be for long. I'm already booked into a clinic in Switzerland. One-way ticket kind of thing.

I suppose I'll miss all this. I don't know. I feel – distant. Like I'm already leaving. Do you know what I mean? Well, you will.

All right. Time to go. I'll take the top copy. Got to mail it to those people I mentioned. Thanks, and here's the car keys.

You'll know it. Can't miss it, really. After all, it's your car.