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The Exodus

A short story by

by

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Oh, man! I almost hit that kid, Ryan thought as he shifted from reverse to drive. It had been two weeks since he moved into his house on Garland Street, and he had no idea there was a newspaper delivery boy for the neighborhood. But Ryan wasn't thinking about that. He didn't have time to stop and consider anything.

Naturally, he would have liked to jump out and scold this kid, but he could see that there was no harm done. So he continued; he had more urgent things to do. Ryan pulled out his cellphone and punched in the address of his final destination with one hand. He cringed at the idea of driving and manipulating his phone—he knew it was dangerous, but he felt the pull to keep moving. As he turned his car onto Highway 89 southbound, his mind was called back to the last time he spoke to his brother, Johnny.

How could I have let things go this long? He asked himself. Has it been six years?

His brother's wife, Annie, made it clear that Johnny wanted to see him. Johnny was in the hospital after a car accident. The urgency he could hear in her voice induced and uncomfortable excitement. Ryan's careful nature, while driving, was being taxed by his desire to make good time.

Why did we let things get so out of hand? Ryan thought. He looked down at his speedometer and slowed his car. I don't want to die on my way to see him.

The four o'clock hour is not the best time to decide to brave the traffic between Ogden, Utah, and Salt Lake City, let alone drive all the way to St. George. Ryan knew that he would be facing several slowdowns, from where Highway 89 merges onto I-15 to Salt Lake City and beyond. He wondered if he would make it south of Provo before seven. The traffic was much better than expected, and Ryan passed Provo after 6:15 pm.

Just as he felt proud of himself for making good time, a phone call came from Annie. She was in tears.

"They're telling me they can't stop the internal bleeding," Annie cried. "They asked me if I had anyone I could call. I know I told you everything would be alright. . ." the phone went silent, and then Ryan could hear her snuffle several times. His eyes began to water as he waited for Annie to compose herself, "but now I don't know." she said.

“Annie, are your parents there?”

“No, they’re in Europe. I left a message on their cell phones, but they haven’t called back. Why did this have to happen right now?” Annie paused and then, with more force, added, “Why did this have to happen at all?”

“Annie, I am on my way. I just passed Provo. I will get there as fast as I can.”

With that, Ryan’s car flew down the interstate. He was not concerned about his speed. He only wished he could travel faster. He tried to wrap his mind around what was going on, formulate some sort of plan. He could not come up with anything. His mind was as hazy as if he was inebriated.

His distraction led to an increasingly faster speed until he was cruising at almost a hundred miles an hour as he approached Fillmore. Unsurprisingly, a member of the Utah highway patrol pulled him over right before he reached the Fillmore exit.

Come on, Ryan! He scolded himself. *You know better than to drive so fast.*

As the police officer approached the car, Ryan debated whether he should tell the officer why he was speeding or if he should just let the officer do his job so he could get on his way. He decided that any explanation would complicate things and may cause more of a delay.

“Where are you going so fast?” The officer remarked.

“St. George,” replied Ryan.

“Any particular reason you are in such a hurry?”

“No, sir.”

“License and registration, please,” replied the officer.

Ryan retrieved the paperwork from his glove compartment and added his driver’s license as he handed them both to the officer. He had always been calm under pressure, but not today. He was stunned to feel his hands begin to shake. As sweat began to bead along his forehead, he realized his heart was pounding, and he started to experience the sensation of being out of breath. Ryan hoped that when the officer returned with his ticket and identification, there would be little conversation.

The officer returned, walking Ryan through all of the ordinary things one might expect when a cop issues a driver a ticket. Something about not admitting guilt and agreeing to appear, or something like that. Ryan barely listened. He was ready to get back on the road. As the officer walked back to his car, Ryan put his car into what he thought was drive.

Wham! Crunch!

Ryan somehow put his gear shift into reverse instead, and now his car was stopped. Right up against the patrol car. The situation would have been funny if not so tragic.

He wondered if he would make it to St. George before midnight. Based on his conversation with Annie, he questioned if that was enough time. He tried to gain some composure, but he could not stop his heart from pounding.

Ryan stepped out of his vehicle to inspect the damage, and to his surprise, it was minimal. He knew there would be some calls back and forth with his insurance company, but he figured it was not that bad—until he looked up at the officer. The policeman was not inspecting the damage; he was inspecting Ryan.

“I’m speechless,” the officer said.

Ryan could no longer contain his emotions, and tears flowed as he tried to explain. He told the officer about his brother’s car accident earlier in the day and about the phone call from Annie. As he did, the stern, disapproving look of the patrolman appeared more focused, and it seemed to Ryan that the officer became more fierce.

The officer remained silent for quite some time. As he walked around the vehicle, Ryan worried about what else might be going on in this stern policeman’s thoughts.

“Well,” the officer said, breaking the long silence. “I can’t let you back into that car. You’re not in a state to drive safely, and I’m going to call for a truck to swing by and pick it up.”

Ryan’s head dropped into his hands as a feeling of helplessness and defeat swept over him. He cursed himself for driving too fast and cursed himself again for letting such stupid things come between him and his brother. He worried about Annie, sitting in the hospital alone, waiting to find out what would happen to her husband. He couldn’t imagine how things could get any worse, nor how he could make it in time to at least tell his brother how sorry he was.

A little over six years ago, Ryan received a similar call (that time from his brother Johnny) about their mother. Johnny’s words were not a surprise; their mother’s health had been dwindling for some time. Johnny told Ryan that he and his girls needed to see their grandma as soon as possible.

It was a tougher thing to arrange than one might expect. For Ryan, it was easy—he was done for the season, so his time was his. The long days of work during the prime asphalt paving season meant that Ryan was nearly unreachable from April to November but hardly worked from December to March.

Working it out with his kids’ mother would not be as simple. That first year after splitting up had become treacherous. Lawyers, court dates, splitting up assets, and

especially working out custody, all seemed to drive knives deeper into Ryan's and his ex-wife Debra's hearts.

His strange pattern of living not only affected his relationship with Debra and how often he could see his girls, but it was used against him as they fought over custody. The battles for who had the girls on which holiday and weekend or any other day had turned an otherwise painful divorce into a breeding ground of resentment that was edging on the brink of domestic civil war.

Six years ago, as Ryan dialed Debra's cell phone, he did so with more than a little trepidation. He expected the next thirty minutes to spark a war of words as he asked for leniency to take his girls to St. George to spend their last Christmas with their grandma.

"Oh, Ryan," a compassionate voice answered.

Ryan struggled to believe it was Debra's voice. The words were expected, but the tone was not.

"Of course. Are you okay? What can I do?" she added.

Ryan was taken back by the compassionate response, a welcome reprieve after months of fighting.

"Ryan, if you want, I can come with you," Debra offered. "I have a friend in St. George I can stay with. You remember Cherie? I could stay there, and it would give the girls a place to go if you need a break."

Who am I listening to? It can't be Debra, Ryan marveled. Except it was. The voice sounded much like the Debra he once fell in love with, the one he thought he lost long ago to his inability to express himself. The compassion showed by Debra helped to heal the rift that had grown between them. They both stopped their fighting and began, to at least be civil, even friendly.

In contrast, the aftermath of his mother's passing left much to be desired when it came to his relationship with his brother Johnny. The last weeks of his mother's life had been wonderful.

Ryan and the girls stayed at Johnny's house. His girls loved spending time with their Aunt Annie and their cousin Jeff while Ryan, Johnny, Annie, and Debra prepared the basement for their mother to come home from the care facility. They prepared as if she may be there for a month, or even a year or two. Deep down, they knew her time was much shorter than that.

The fact that all of this happened at Christmas time was a blessing and a curse—a blessing because the girls only missed one day of school before the winter break. A curse because Ryan was concerned it would tarnish the girls' memories of the

holiday season. Another blessing was Debra; she did come down and, though she stayed with her friend, it was almost like they were a team once again.

The tensions of the holiday, mixed with how they would take care of their mother, weighed heavily on both brothers. Agitations over dumb things began to arise between them.

Growing up, Ryan and Johnny rarely fought. Ryan was almost four years older than Johnny, and Johnny idealized Ryan, as many younger brothers do. Since they grew up in a home without a father, Ryan often stepped into that role. There was the odd disagreement, but they never erupted into an all-out battle, physical or otherwise. Ryan loved his brother, and the feeling was mutual. It was more than a little unnerving to begin to have these squabbles now.

The disagreements began with what kind of flowers their mother may want at her funeral or which hymns to sing at the church service. Ryan thought that his mother's favorite hymn was "How Great Thou Art," and Johnny swore that it was "There is a Green Hill Far-Away" Neither Ryan nor his brother wanted to relent until Debra and Annie piped up and suggested to include them both in the service.

Both sons could only speak to their mother in the small windows of lucidity that seemed to shrink as the days passed. The Alzheimer's had been taking its effect for a few years, and they were used to telling their mom the same stories or listening as she repeated herself over and over. Once in a while, often in the afternoon after lunch, their mother would have moments of clarity. She would ask Ryan how the girls were doing and remind Johnny to make sure that Jeff kept his grades up.

During these times, the brothers knew that, if they wanted to, they could use this time to clear up some of their disagreements but decided not to corrupt the little moments when the family could be with their grandma.

On December 23rd, six years ago, Evelyn Rasmussen left this earth. She passed away with her family by her side.

The funeral came and went without any more disagreements, thanks to an end of life plan Annie found in Evelyn's papers. They had hoped to find a will or document stating what to do with the remaining assets and bills.

The bills were manageable; she had money in a bank account. The house was simple; they both decided to sell it. There were a few knick-knacks divvied out to one family member or another.

The girls all received some of their grandmother's costume jewelry. Jeff was given an old .22 caliber rifle owned by Evelyn's brother before he passed away in a farming accident as a teenager. Ryan and Johnny both swapped stories of using that

rifle on one rabbit hunting expedition or another. Johnny told Jeff he could have the rifle when he completed a Hunter Safety course and demonstrated his knowledge and ability to handle the gun.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly until the question of who would take possession of their mother's wedding ring was broached. The ring was more than a representation of something precious that connected them with their mother. It was also a physical connection to their father. The brothers were both young when their dad left for the war in Afghanistan. On the way to his first assignment, his helicopter was attacked, killing him and his team. Johnny was eight, and Ryan was twelve.

The battle over who would keep the ring erupted over dinner on the night Ryan left to go back home. One brother claimed it should be his for one reason, and the other claimed it should be his for another. Ryan barely remembered the reasons he gave that justified why he should have it instead of Johnny.

The only thing Ryan could concretely remember was that as he left, he told his brother, "Keep the damn thing. You always needed Mom more than I did anyway! You couldn't even move out of town for that big job you wanted. If it makes you feel better, just take it. I don't care!" With that, Ryan left, slamming his car door as he began the drive back toward Ogden. He hasn't spoken to Johnny since.

Six years later, Ryan stood on the side of I-15 feeling like he had no hope to talk to Johnny again—to ask for his forgiveness. He started to wonder if he should try to video chat but realized he had no signal. It seemed that the universe, maybe even God himself, did not want Ryan to reconcile with his brother. Ryan's feeling of despair became nearly unbearable.

"Get your stuff and jump in," the officer said. "We've gotta get you to your brother."

Ryan grabbed what he thought he might need out of the car and frantically jumped into the patrol car's passenger seat. It was the first time Ryan bothered to look at the officer's last name and thought, Talmage would make a great first name if I ever have a son.

As they drove south along I-15, officer Talmage spoke to his dispatch and then to another officer. Ryan wasn't exactly paying attention, so he was surprised when Officer Talmage exited the freeway at Cove Fort. He was surprised again when they pulled up to another patrol car, Officer Talmage said goodbye, and Officer Young said hello.

In Beaver, he said goodbye to Officer Young and hello to Officer Jensen. In Parowan, it was Officer Kimball, and in Cedar City, it was Officer Seegmiller who drove

Ryan directly to St George. Officer Seegmiller walked Ryan into the Dixie Regional Medical Center and remained for a while as support.

These officers did not need to perform this service. They had done their duty. No one could possibly blame them for impounding Ryan's car. Ryan was driving much too fast and was as close to being drunk with grief as if he had spent all evening drinking whiskey.

Ryan tried to thank Officer Seegmiller, but the words stuck in his throat. The officer nodded his head, letting Ryan know he accepted his unspoken thanks, and then motioned for Ryan to proceed into his brother's room.

Johnny was stable when Ryan entered the hospital room. The two brothers cried and apologized for the lost time. After a while, Ryan looked up to see that Officer Seegmiller was standing outside, talking to one of the doctors. He excused himself. He wanted to offer his gratitude to the Utah Highway Patrol members for seeing him safely to his brother. Ryan had made it in time.

The internal bleeding was unrepairable and, within a few hours of Ryan's arrival, Johnny exited this life.

Annie remained with Johnny in the hospital room until the mortuary arrived. Ryan stepped out to find a drinking fountain. As he finished drinking the cold water, his phone rang. It was Debra.

"Ryan, where are you? Did you forget? Tonight was Allison's band concert. She kept looking for you."

"Oh. Yeah. I am so sorry. No, I'm in St. George."

"Why?"

"It's Johnny. He's gone." Ryan wanted to give more of an explanation, but he lost the ability to speak.

"Oh, Ryan, what happened?"

After a pause, Ryan regained some ability to talk and, between his sobs, tried to tell Debra about Johnny's accident and his exodus to St. George.

"Why does it always seem like everyone leaves us at Christmas time?" he cried. "Aren't we supposed to be happy? Isn't it supposed to be fun?"

"I don't know about fun, but I think you are mixing up the difference between happiness and joy. I never thought there was any promise that we would be happy at Christmas. Only that Christmas would bring us joy."

"Huh?"

"Let me say it another way. Christmas is no worse or better than any other time of the year when experiencing life's tragedies and loss. When you and I separated, that

was in May, and that was probably the worst day of my life. Our expectations around Christmas time may be the problem,” Debra said. “But based on what you told me, from a certain point of view, your day was filled with the joy of Christmas.

“As each officer took his time to move you closer and closer to your destination, you experienced the joy of being served and having a burden lifted.

“You were able to forgive Johnny, and he was able to forgive you. And you are now able to be there for Annie as she puts her life back together. Yes, you are sad.” She said. “And it may be a while before you feel happiness. But happiness is fleeting. Joy is lasting.”

Ryan realized his tears had subsided, and he felt, at least for a moment, that he could maintain his composure.

“Deb?” It had been quite a while since he had called her Deb. “How did I ever let you slip away?”

“Well, that’s a much longer conversation,” Deb said with a bit of sarcasm.

“Can I ask you a favor?”

“Yes, of course, you can have the girls for the funeral. They probably want to be there for Christmas, too.”

“Thank you. But that’s not exactly what I was going to ask.”

“What is it?” Debra replied.

“Do *you* want to come down here?” Ryan asked carefully. “I would love it if we could spend the holidays as a family. You know, like we used to?”

“Of course I do.”

Authors note:

If I told you that a driver was pulled over and then immediately backed into the police officer that pulled her over for speeding, you would probably roll your eyes and say something like, "I can't believe some people are allowed on the road." And you probably wouldn't have any issue with that cop impounding that driver's car either.

According to news reports, Helen "Skeeter" Smith left her home in Southern Nevada and sped up I-15 towards Ogden, Utah. She was obviously in a hurry because somewhere in central Utah, she sped past a Utah State Highway Patrolman, who understandably pulled her over. He only gave Helen a warning. But then Helen accidentally backed her car into his police car.

Trooper Jeff Jones felt that it was no longer safe for her to be driving, so he had the car moved to a secure location. That could be the end of the story. A simple speeding situation and a small accident prompted a UHP officer to make sure Helen and the traveling public were safe.

But Officer Jones had discovered the reason why she was making such an accelerated effort to go north. And even though he didn't have to do anything, he chose to.

You see, Helen had received a phone call about a family member, which prompted her journey. The word came that her son Randy was seriously ill and had been admitted into the Ogden Regional Medical Center.

Officer Jones's paradigm shift resulted in him driving her from Fillmore in Millard County, where she was, to Juab County. He handed her off to Trooper Jared Jensen, who drove her to Utah County, who then handed her off to Trooper Chris Bishop, who took her to Salt Lake County. She was then taken to the Ogden Regional Medical Center by Trooper Andrew Pollard.

With the help of four Utah Highway Patrolmen, Helen made it to Ogden to see her son, who passed a few days later.

*My story, *The Exodus*, is fiction, but this real story inspired it. Nothing about this story has anything to do with Christmas. On the other hand, everything about this story is what the "Christmas Spirit" is all about.*