

Judge Thy Neighbor
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“We aren't even out of the driveway.”

This is the sentence that kept repeating in my head as I shoveled the slushy white snow that was lodged beneath the tires of my father's 1999 Cadillac Deville. This year the amount of snowfall was particularly ample, and a copious amount of the white fluff had accumulated in front of our house. Our plow service decided that this would be the best time to conveniently forget that our address was on their list of customers. We had been on our way to our church's annual Christmas Eve service when the family car got stuck in the wet piles of snow that had collected at the very end of our driveway.

“Dig out more snow!” yelled my mom, who was sitting comfortably in the warmth of the car. My brother and I stood back as she revved the gas pedal, the wheels spinning in furious circles.

“This is hopeless,” my brother mumbled, our shovels crunching in unison as we continued to remove more snow.

I glared at him, making no effort to hide my annoyance. “It's not like we can leave the car out here,” I spat, flexing my fingers in an attempt to thaw them from their raw and frozen state. My gloves had long since become soggy, and my hands were starting to burn with cold.

My dad trudged up the snow-covered driveway, carrying dry gloves and a large bag of kitty litter that he had gotten from inside the house. “Any luck?” he asked, though our lack of progress was painfully clear.

I took the bag of litter and began to spread it around the wheels. “No,” I sighed impatiently. “We might as well try this.”

Just as my mom got ready to press on the gas, the lights of our neighbor's car flashed. Their vehicle crept backwards, coming dangerously close to a large pile of snow. All four of us stopped moving, our necks straining to see the new developments at the house across the street.

“I would laugh if they got stuck,” my dad joked. “They are part of the Caddy Club.” He smiled slightly at his made-up nickname for any person who owned a distinguished car like himself.

My mom and I exchanged eye rolls, knowing that the condition of their driveway was no better than our own. Being a member of the elite “Caddy Club” would hardly influence their luck. Even so, we anxiously watched the matching car back up, frozen with anticipation.

As soon as the brake lights turned red, we heard the sound of wheels speeding against a lack of traction. My entire family burst out laughing, irony filling the cool night air.

“I don't believe it!” my dad laughed, slapping his knee in surprise.

My mom reached through the open window and swatted his jacket sleeve. “Jerry, go and help them!” she ordered, though a smile still played on her lips.

I grabbed my shovel and followed my dad, not wanting to stay with our tragic situation. The two of us sprinted down the street, red plastic shovels over our shoulders like the swords of brave soldiers out to rescue the damsel in distress. We arrived to two men desperately rocking the Deville back and forth and a third in the driver's seat, repeatedly revving the engine.

“Need some help?” I panted, leaning on my shovel for support.

The man on the left side of the car snapped his head around to face me, his dark face shining in the light of the street lamp. A shabby, faded windbreaker covered his behemoth figure, as if his bulging muscles could provide enough warmth. I smiled slightly, wanting to ignore the fear that was making my heart pound against my ribs.

This group of neighbors was one of the few black families in a very white suburb and, though it was never intentional, was not well known among the rest of the neighborhood. Police cars would sometimes pull up in the middle of the night, the lights flashing in the windows of the surrounding houses. Women often left the house fuming with anger, shouting explicit statements as they towed a small child behind them. Gossip quickly spread over the rest of the cul-de-sac. Most families kept their whisperings quiet, my family included. Racism was what ignorant people practiced, something horrid and almost universally despised. It belonged in the Deep South or the 1960's, not a Midwest

middle-class neighborhood. And yet here it was, making strangers out of the people I had lived next to for my entire life. I scrutinized the young man's features, trying in vain to at least guess at his name.

“Yeah, but you don't need no shovels,” he said, pointing to our tools. “Just help us rock it.” His face remained stony and rigid even as he spoke. *“I see what you're thinking,”* his sneer seemed to say, *“And I'm not fooled.”*

We took our positions, the two men at the front windows and my dad and I at the back bumper. The man at the driver's seat pushed the pedal, and the wheels started whizzing. Slowly, the car began to move back and forth. I shoved against the clammy car with all my might, trying to follow the rhythm being set by the stronger men.

“Keep going!” yelled the driver, the whine of the tires crescendoing with every push. Momentum started to gather, and the car started to swing, back and forth like a wild pendulum. With one final shove, the tires found their traction, and the car rushed out of the driveway.

We whooped with joy, the feeling of success rushing through our bodies. The driver raised a triumphant fist, the man next to me flashed a smile, and my dad gave the second man a hearty pat on the back. For a few blissful seconds, I let my heart soar with the delight of accomplishment, all judgmental thoughts disappearing with my frustration.

“You need some help, too?” asked the man in the driver's seat, gesturing toward our identical car.

The two men walked wordlessly to our stranded car. We repeated the same process, confidently prying the twin Cadillac from the slush.

The men left as soon as they came, it seemed, as if our acknowledgement of their help would only lead to awkwardness. I wondered if they felt the same guilt that I did, not knowing the names of the people who lived less than a few feet away. Did they sense the same unreasonable dread, knowing that race was really the only thing to blame? Or were they just glad to have had a helping hand, able to

move on because of a beautiful moment of serendipity and teamwork?

I raised a gloved hand in the air. “Thanks a lot, guys!” I yelled, waving a feeble goodbye.

Thick and fluffy snowflakes began to descend from the sky. I laughed as the snow in our driveway began to increase once more, knowing that things are not always so black and white.