The Essentials

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When the bad weather rolled into the town, Clark was on his way out. The clouds didn't look quite as ominous as he would have hoped (more of a light grey reminder of the morning's forecast than a darkened force of destruction), but he would make do. Storms came through the state pretty frequently in the spring months. The wind stripped budding leaves from trees and made the rain sting any exposed skin. The glass facades of the buildings downtown shuddered with the stronger gusts, and Clark, leaving work early on a Friday afternoon for only the second time in his life, briefly hoped this storm would be the one to overcome their reflective surfaces.

Clark was the kind of guy who wore a leather jacket and looked good in it, but then ruined whatever vibe he might have going by forgetting to take off his narrow-framed reading glasses. He was also the kind of guy who bought a fast motorcycle well before his midlife crisis and then, out of consideration for his neighbors, put a better muffler on it so as to not wake them up on the off chance he came home late. When his midlife crisis finally did hit, Clark was the kind of guy who bought a Prius.

But perhaps most importantly, Clark was the kind of guy who took people at their word. He had taken his fiance at her word when she accepted his ring (and again when she said "I do"). He had taken his boss at his word when he said that hard work would be rewarded. He had even taken his friend seriously when he said investing money in the stock market was a good idea. So a few years later, Clark was the kind of guy who was broke, divorced, and stuck in a dead-end job selling insurance.

Priuses, it turned out, were not comfortable cars in which to spend any significant amount of time. The seats seemed perpetually locked in a stiffened upright position, as though Toyota couldn't bear having their flagship of environmental awareness seen being driven with bad posture. Clark normally didn't mind, of course. He bought it for his twenty-minute commute, and twenty minutes of good posture never hurt anyone. But as he passed the sign for the city limits, the wind threatening to drive small drops of rain through his windshield, the daunting idea of sitting lodged in this respectable position became a bit overwhelming.

But he was on his way. That was the important thing. He had packed what he thought of as the essentials into the cramped trunk that morning before work, knowing his motivation for leaving town would peak around 3:00 in the afternoon. Sure enough, at 2:30 his group held a
meeting to come up with a new selling strategy. After listening to some inane ideas, Clark, in what might be viewed as the most reckless move in his life to that point, stood up (knocking over his chair in the process) and strode across the drab conference room to the door. After only the slightest hesitation, he turned the knob, wrenched the door open, and, pace quickening with each step, made his way to the stairwell door. He already had a plan for this part. He couldn't risk the elevator taking too long to get to the 11th floor and stranding him there in plain sight of any potential questioners. So he took the stairs (two at a time, and sometimes even jumping down the last three).

He drove at a measured pace out of the parking ramp, but so as to stay in keeping with his new-found rebellious side, he did turn the music up quite a lot. In fact, he was even sure the people outside his car could hear it. Realizing this, he switched the station from country to one of the ones playing popular music. And when a rap song came on next, he abruptly turned it off, glancing around to make sure he hadn't attracted any undue attention. Rather than dwell too much on his sudden self-consciousness, Clark thought about what his colleagues were thinking. He briefly wondered whether his display of storming out had triggered any others to express their displeasure in a similar manner. He might have even started a company-wide revolution. Once the news spread, the entire insurance industry could be in jeopardy.

Clark was especially proud of the way he hadn't even bothered to pick up his papers from the conference room table. The charts and spreadsheets of market analysis had been left behind, symbolic of the shackles he had cast off in one decisive moment. He hadn't even bothered to stop by his desk on the way out. He was sure someone had noticed this. His disdain for the company was so great that he couldn't even be bothered to take his things from his cubicle on the way out. (Of course, all of the important stuff had been taken home either yesterday or the day before in preparation for his grandiose departure.) And here he was. Free at last.

Hours passed with Clark behind the wheel. In fact, by the time more gas was required, Clark was sure he couldn't drive any more. So he pulled over at a nearby rest area, crawled into the back seat, and fell asleep. In fact, the interior of the car was so cramped, he fell asleep five or six more times throughout the night, each time waking from a sudden pain or cramp in areas he didn't know were essential for sleeping. After a few hours it became obvious that the essentials he had packed should definitely have included a blanket. The only good way to avoid feeling the cold was to sleep through it, but maintaining any semblance of a comfortable position
was impossible, despite how drained he felt after his adrenaline-filled day.

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When the sunrise finally justified staying awake after one of his many jolts of discomfort, Clark wasn't even capable of noticing the beauty of the reds, purples and oranges that lit up the sky. His rebellious nature had fled sometime near the beginning of the night, and the only thing that kept him heading away from his former life was the remainder of his triumphant feeling, only an echo of the thunderous bloodrush that had overwhelmed him the day before. It was just enough to give him a bit of resolve, so he propped himself up against the washing-board of a front seat and gingerly worked the pedals until he reached enough civilization to have a coffee shop.

He had been planning on a quick double shot cafe latte, but then the young lady behind the counter (her name tag designated her as a Jenny) made the mistake of asking, “And how are you doing today?” in such a peppy tone that he couldn't help but divulge a bit of how he was feeling. He tried to keep it brief, intending on just a short “Well, I didn't sleep very well, but I'll be okay once I've had my coffee,” but he made the mistake of starting this simple bit of information a bit too early in its chronology.

“Well, I quit my terrible job yesterday, and I slept in my car last night and almost froze to death, but I'll be fine once I've had my coffee.” And then, realizing how ridiculous that sounded, he felt the need to clarify.

“Well, I probably won't be fine, per se, but my job was a dead end and it felt really good to quit, and while I don't really know what I'm going to do now, I do know I could really use a cup of coffee, so I think things will be at least better once I've had it.” But then he realized how much he was rambling, so he glanced around for something to make his little outburst seem a little less awkward.

“I'm sorry; I didn't really mean to say all that. This is a pretty nice place. I like the, uh... lights. They're, you know, a bit different.” Which wasn't all that true, but for Jenny any subject change would have done the trick.

“Well, thank you. I wish I could say I had something to do with the lighting choices, but I really just work here.” She turned around, but seemed a little less uneasy. In fact, Clark noticed her glance back over her shoulder, a sure sign she was interested in him. Or at least curious. It must have been his rebelliousness showing through in some way. His courage
restored with his coffee and a “good luck” from Jenny, Clark made it all the way back to his Prius before climbing in reminded him of the lingering soreness in his hips and lower legs. He wished for a moment he had taken his motorcycle, briefly imagining how much cooler it would have been to roar away (because rebellious motorcycles didn’t care about being considerate to neighbors late at night) wrapped in a shroud of mystery and allure. But motorcycles were even less commodious than cars, and he didn’t have money for hotels, so he sighed and purred off in his Prius, afraid of flooring it lest it reprimand him for the poor fuel economy.

In the next town he bought a newspaper, which he sat and read in his car. He scanned the headlines for any mention of his abrupt departure, and failing that, of any mention of the storm. The winds, it reported, had reached sustained speeds of over forty-five miles per hour, and some photos tucked away in the middle of the paper (a place where only the most dedicated would ever see them) showed some damage from branches being blown into buildings. Having established that none of those buildings were his place of residence, Clark tossed the paper and resumed driving.

Yet another unforeseen dilemma cropped up an hour later when the radio started cutting out. Clark had completely forgotten that it was possible to get far enough away from the city to outdistance the radio signal. This had him quite out of sorts. He had been relying on his familiar country songs to reassure him of the virtue of suffering through the hard times. The lamenting lyrics were comforting in their relatability. He hadn’t ever been able to provide an answer to anyone asking why he liked country, but now, in his new situation, he realized it must have always been the case that he was made for heartache. And then the whole event began to seem worth it. Before, when the inconveniences were small, like job dissatisfaction or being too trusting, nothing had stuck out as particularly worth changing. But to realize that he had a purpose in life, that a whole genre of music was written for him, made Clark’s bold action on Friday seem justified.

Pressing even farther on, with about as much assurance as a single person can have that they have done the right thing (especially if there is no actual evidence of the sort), Clark began noticing some signs of wind damage. It wasn’t as though there hadn’t been signs in every town, but it was just getting to be 9:00am, and people were emerging from their houses, looking around, and helping each other out. Clark must have driven by five or six neighborhood groups engaged in the process of unification
and mutual support. It was about this time that his cell phone rang, as he watched from the relative comfort of his car one group's efforts in moving an entire tree trunk. Responsible driver that he was, he stopped the car and pulled out his phone.

He looked at the screen to see who was first noticing his absence. It was his neighbor, and Clark wondered whether he had heard the news from someone or had taken note of the absence of his car. He answered his phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey Clark! It's Greg from next door. I saw your yard was a bit messed up and was wondering if you'd like some help clearing it out.” Greg must have just missed the fact he had left town. It was understandable; sometimes he went out for coffee on Saturday mornings, so perhaps that's where Greg thought he was.

“I'm not home right now. I didn't even know I had been hit. Is there any damage to the house?” Clark didn't really know why he was asking. He told himself it was just out of curiosity, wondering whether all ties to his former life were being severed.

“I can't really tell, but everything looks okay. I'm sorry, I had no idea you weren't even home! If there's anything you need help with when you get back, you just be sure and let me know. After all, what are neighbors for?”

Clark thought that was a good question, but refrained from comment. If Greg wasn't even a good enough neighbor to know when he had made a life-changing decision to leave town suddenly, he certainly wasn't about to take his offer of help seriously.

“Okay, Greg. I'll be sure to do that. Bye now, and thanks for calling,” he replied with a slight trace of sarcasm.

“Alright, then. Bye.”

Clark wondered what Greg would think when nobody came to clear up whatever debris was in the front yard. Obviously Greg depended on Clark for something. He had called him on a Saturday morning, concerned for his well-being, after all. Clark turned his attention back to the families outside his car. It looked cold out there, and the wind hadn't let up much since the brunt of the storm, though the clouds were long gone. Putting aside his rebellious persona, Clark abruptly opened the door and made his way over to the group, which seemed comprised of at least three generations worth of neighbors.

“Is there anything I can do?”

The man who seemed to be leading things for the most part gave
him a once-over. He must not have been too disgusted by what he saw, for he shrugged his shoulders and didn't even ask his name. “Yeah, you could help these guys. They're headed over to the waste pile to unload what we've moved so far.”

Clark was surprised at how readily he had been accepted. He didn't have long to be impressed with himself. A quick introduction to the two boys (teenagers, high school aged) and he was off in the little blue Chevy pickup truck.

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The wasteyard was a busy place, but nobody was lingering much, so the line moved quickly. No sooner had they backed the truck up to a pile of branches and leaves than the two boys had hopped into the back and were pitching things out. Clark eased himself to the ground and made his way back. He put down the tailgate and clambered into the bed. He did a token amount of work, but couldn't help feeling redundant as the boys stooped, grabbed, rose and pitched all in continuous motion. The only thing they needed help with was a particularly wide section of branch (or trunk) that had to be rolled out of the bed and carried the short distance to the designated area. The two boys rolled the piece to the edge, one steadied it while the other got down, and then Clark and the boy carried it between them to join other large chunks. They thanked him readily enough for his help and drove back to their neighborhood, which had another load ready by the time they got there. They hopped into a different truck and repeated the process, with Clark's only real purpose being to assist when something proved too clumsy for the two of them. Not that Clark considered himself out of shape or anything. Granted, he didn't exercise much, but he kept the weight off for the most part. He hadn't bought clothes in a new size in over two years, and still looked good on his motorcycle sporting his leather jacket. But he was no teenager, and it showed.

After another few loads the families had decided they had done enough. Clark bid them farewell, climbed into his Prius, and drove off, not even tempted to gun the engine. He backtracked to the coffee house, arriving in time for a late lunch. He was pleased to see Jenny was still working, and took his time looking at the menu. He knew right away what he wanted, and spent the extra time wondering how to ask a coffee house girl out for a cup of coffee. In the end he just ordered his quiche and attempted some small talk, avoiding altogether any subject of interest. Just before he left, Jenny branched out from talking about the weather (for once, not entirely a stereotypical topic).
"I thought you were headed for parts unknown when you came in here this morning." She smiled a bit as she put her hand on her hip, clearly expecting an interesting answer. Clark didn't really have one to give.

"Me too." They both knew that wasn't enough. "My car isn't very comfortable."

"I see. Well, are you headed all the way back to the city then?" Jenny was quite forthright. Clark supposed she could afford to be. After all, she probably talked to tons of people every day, and for lots of them it was probably the only time they would be there.

"I don't know. My neighbor called and said my property needed some attention after the storm." That seemed pretty weak as well, but he hadn't ever told her he wasn't planning on going back.

"Well, good luck then, with your house and your job and all." And with that, she walked away. Clark thanked her retreating figure, pulled out the last of his cash and tipped her three percent more than he usually tipped waitresses. He wasn't quite done being reckless. On the way out he grabbed one of the paper menus by the door, though he knew he probably wasn't coming back.

He walked to his car, despising its very shape, and got in, disgusted with himself. He calmly turned the key in the ignition, placidly pressed the gas, and accelerated gently to the edge of the parking lot, where he jammed his foot to the floor and reveled in the squeal of rubber (however short-lived) as he peeled out. The acceleration was hardly noteworthy, but his adrenaline pumped regardless, and he watched the display with contempt as it glowed angrily, ridiculing him for only getting eight miles to the gallon.

Clark quickly eased up, his statement made, and settled back into his normal, considerate driving. He let people merge in front of him on his way back into the city, kept his patience when he hit bumper to bumper traffic, and hummed along to his favorite country station. His posture was perfect, and his Prius happily reported he was getting great gas mileage.

It took until after dark to get back, and upon examining the back of the house, Clark saw that a rather large piece of debris had done a number on the corner of his deck before shattering his kitchen window. He called the appropriate people and was put on the end of the waiting list. The weather got cold again that night, and rather than try to do combat with the gaping hole in the kitchen, Clark turned off the heat altogether. Concerned that someone might take advantage of his broken window, he slept on the couch, a bit cramped for space, and inadequately padded.
But this time, when he started shivering, he got up and found some more blankets.

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He called Greg in the morning, and they went out into his yard with hacksaws and dismantled the limbs that had fallen. He found his satellite dish under one particularly big branch, and Greg helped him stack all that they could by the curb in the hopes that the city would deal with it, but if not, Greg’s son lived across town and had a truck they could borrow within the next couple of days. He spent the rest of the day in the garage, taking apart sections of his motorcycle and putting them back together, satisfying himself that everything was in perfect working order.

Clark spent another night on the couch, but never felt the cold under his layers of blankets. He rode his motorcycle to work the next morning, shoulder bag flapping off to the side. He walked up the ten flights of stairs to his cubicle and sat down. Everything was as he had left it. When he found an excuse to walk by the conference room, he noticed with only a bit of surprise that his charts and graphs were still on the table in front of his seat. Nobody looked at him differently, and his boss went the entire day without giving any indication he had noticed his display of defiance.

In fact, the only person who talked to him the whole day was a girl from his team who told him she was glad he was feeling better, and that he had looked pretty ill when he left last week. Clark just thanked her and reached down to the bag next to his desk. In it were the essentials. Two things: a menu to a coffee shop with the phone number prominently displayed on the front, and an emergency blanket.