

Andy is an imaginative writer, with the ability to illustrate a vivid picture in his reader's mind. *A Rusting Place* is a story about a relationship between a father and a son and the work that they do. We spent lots of time revising this piece over and over so that we could mold it into exactly what Andy had in mind. It's a great piece and I hope you enjoy reading it!

~Elizabeth Reynolds, Tutor

### **A Rusting Place**

By Andrew Stepan

This one had annoyed him. Calls before six a.m. usually didn't get to Bobby, but he had slept hard; he had been sleeping hard lately and couldn't put his finger on why. Sheryl even had to wake him. That never happens. Something in his bones he supposed; he wasn't getting any younger that is. A hint of sun sprinkled over the dying grass, dancing off the first frost of the year. He loved the sunrise. He usually saw it before anyone with a mouth, so he appreciated its silence.

The truck groaned down Old Highway O, the passenger mirror jiggling with every bump, being held on with worn duct tape. He loved his truck too. You wouldn't exactly call it quiet, but the jumbling, racketing and bouncing of its parts had its own language; a language he could understand. He made a quick left, pelting gravel on the bottom of the truck. The tiny ranch house stood quiet as if frozen from the night's frost. "Sheryl still must be asleep," he thought. He drove past the house, past the garage and stopped at the gate. Leaving the truck running and jumping out, he unlocked the gate and swung open its rotting wooden doors.

The sun had begun to show off even more now, but the hanging clouds of November stole the show leaving an overcast on the graveyard before him. Cars, trucks, vans, buses and racing cars piled on top of each other; their windows smashed, their tires flat, their paint chipped, their seats gone, all sat in rows one on top of the other. Leaves filled their cabs; weeds grew from their glove boxes. They were all dead, and he had another funeral for them to endure.

He found an open slot and slowly backed into it. He walked behind the truck, leaving it running. "This one won't take long," he thought. A small, rusted pickup had been following him the entire way home, its front end smashed in. He unhooked the totaled vehicle from his own, it falling to the ground with a thud. "Ran the lights," he thought. "Idiot." He forced open the driver side door and began to dissect.

"Rotten shame, brand new leather seats and everything," he muttered, his icy breath floating before him. He began to rummage through the cab; empty beer bottles, a left tennis shoe, crumpled up pieces of paper with wads of gum in them littered the interior. He threw the items into a pile, keeping certain treasures for himself. He crawled onto the seat as he spotted a Hank William's tape under the glove box and gingerly put it in his left coat pocket. He sat in the driver's seat for another moment, scanning the dashboard for anything else he might like for himself. He had enough religious figurines (Sheryl especially liked the ones of Mary and the baby Jesus), and he had enough chew to last him the week. "Ah hah" he whispered. "I need a new watch." He had given Charlie, his son, his own before he left.

It was a Timex, had a gold band, but with further inspection had its face smashed, and was stopped at 3:02. Gary must have forgotten to take this with them after the cleanup, he thought. He threw it into the pile with the beer bottles. After all, it had a little arm hair and a sliver of skin stuck in between the bands. And that blood would be a bitch to get off.

Charlie had always been there to help clean out the cars. He usually liked to keep anything that had slid between the seats reasoning that they “must have been trying to get away anyways.” The both of them had gotten up for these early morning calls nearly every day of the week, even on Sunday’s, much to Sheryl’s dismay. They didn’t talk much when they woke that early, mostly on account of the early hour; but he liked knowing Charlie was there, next to him, helping him. After all, he wasn’t getting any younger. Charlie liked those early morning calls too, he could just tell. They had been doing them ever since he was six, and back then their early morning calls were never quiet. He squawked and talked the entire drive, there and back. But each year, the drive got quieter and quieter. He grew to appreciate the silence.

Charlie wasn’t there this morning. In fact, Charlie hadn’t been there for the past month-in-a-half. Bobby had gotten used to his absence; he didn’t knock on his door every morning for him to get up, he ate breakfast at Joe’s by himself now, and he gutted these wrecks by himself now too. He wasn’t getting any younger, you know. College had to happen some time – he knew it, but he didn’t want it to happen nor did he expect it to happen. He didn’t understand why anyone with a perfectly solid, steady career laid out in front of them for the rest of their lives would want to waste four years of their life away from where they belonged: at home. He just couldn’t understand it. Anytime Charlie would mention Northwestern, he would have a fit, and Charlie didn’t like those fits. Maybe that’s why their early morning calls had gotten quiet.

He had found the last of what he wanted. “Shame these seats go to waste” he thought. He grabbed the appropriate tools from his box, and started to tear them out. “I’ll save um. Maybe Charlie would like um for that new junker he bought.” He cringed at the thought of Charlie purchasing a car without him around, but that’s what he told Sheryl over the phone. He hoped it wasn’t a Chevy; he was a Ford man.

Sheryl told him last night that Charlie had decided to come home for the weekend; the first weekend since he had left. Anxiety bled over him, with the thought of his homecoming. He hadn’t spoken to his son after he left. He wasn’t one for phones; he preferred a two way. Instead of the awkward silences, you just got static and static was much better than the silence that had come between the two of them before Charlie left.

“Bobby!” He heard a distant shrill of a voice from the house. It was Sheryl. “Bobby, Gary just called! You got another one out on Franklin. And hurry up, Charlie said he would be here early!”

“Another one already...Christ” he thought. If only Gary would have waited twenty more minutes to call, then Charlie could be here to help him. He looked down at his wrist, forgetting the absence of his watch. He hopped into the truck, the engine churning as he kicked up loose gravel and got back on the highway. He wasn’t the only truck on the road now; his eyes

followed each car he passed hoping to spot Charlie's new ride driving home. He then realized he had no idea what he was looking for.

The red and blue dance of Gary's lights was up ahead on the right shoulder. He squinted, trying to see what the situation was. It didn't look good: a small Chevy, two door, blue, smashed into an exit sign, its windshield gone and shards of bloodstained glass littering the road. Turning and backing up his truck, he got out, avoiding the glass.

"Nice to see ya again so early. When's the last time we had two in the same morning?" Gary asked, he gut chuckling.

"I don't think we ever had two this early, at least not two from different wrecks. What do we got this time?"

"Teenager, we think. Body flew out; hit the road...smashed his face in. No i.d. Poor guy's ma wouldn't even recognize him."

"Most mothers don't at that age anyways" he said, trying to make light of the situation. Gary chuckled. They had a parting smile, as Bobby prepared to tow the totaled automobile away. The morning frost had already melted as he drove his familiar route home. He turned the truck, kicked up gravel, swung open the rotting doors and found a final, peaceful resting place.

Getting out of his truck, he stopped to stare at the remaining bits of glass that hung from the frame of the windshield. "Damn it," he thought. He would have to cover that up before it snowed. He opened the driver side door with relative ease and began his rummage. Dirty socks and t-shirts littered the back seat, the cab still smelling of blood. He dug through the laundry; a backpack was under a pair of stained corduroys. Knowing that none of this was any good to him, he began to throw it into a pile outside of the car, until he saw his watch, Charlie's watch, silver-plated, scratched, with a slow second hand sitting on the dashboard.

All he could hear was silence. He needed noise. He grabbed his chest, gasping for breath knowing that he felt as old now as he ever would.

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