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A middle-reader short story

THE PARKING LOT

by Tim Kissman

LIMELIGHT CREATIONS

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The six words Jerry expected to hear from his mother came the minute she shut off the motor and took her keys from the ignition. "I'll be back in a minute," she chirped, flinging open the door, and snatching her purse from the seat of the car. She left the keys in the car's ignition so Jerry could at least turn on the radio and roll down the windows to help break the mid-summer July heat. Thank goodness for small favors, Jerry thought.

When Jerry's mom shopped at Anna's Fabric a minute seldom meant sixty seconds. Instead, it turned into hours. By his best estimation, the fifty-percent-off sale was good for at least one hour. Normally he prepared for his mother's fanatical fabric worship by bringing a Clive Cussler book or his Handspring Visor, but he was caught off guard today. With three weeks before the start of eighth grade, he thought shopping for school clothes would end in time for the 7 o'clock *The Simpsons* rerun.

But, it was on the way home when the bright orange and black sale sign caught his mom's attention. It meant Jerry's fate was to wait in the car for her eventual return. He'd rather sit in a dentist's chair and have his teeth examined with a rusty knife than be forced to wander through the aisles of fabric his mother loved so deeply.

Although it was warm, the sun was slowly setting, making it bearable to sit inside the red car. A slight breeze also helped. Leaning against the cloth seats, Jerry ran his fingers through his wavy black hair and sighed. He cracked his neck by twisting it violently in one direction, causing the same dull snaps that grossed out his sister at the dinner table. Trying to get comfortable, he pushed his seat back and reclined, leaving only his head in view of the parking lot.

Anna's Fabric was in an out-of-the-way strip mall well past its prime. There were more empty stores than filled ones in the desolate brick building. Besides the fabric store, there was Hamma & Nails nail salon, Melting Memories ice cream, Lo's Chop-Chop, an empty karate dojo and a place called Illusion Confusion Jokes and Gags. They were going out of business with a bang, according to the huge pink lettered-sign hanging in the window.

Directly across from Jerry's Grand Prix was a full size green and tan Ford truck. Four rows forward and two rows to Jerry's right was a white Thunderbird. Six spots to his left, parked in a handicapped space next to the fabric store's entrance, was an old Jetta that faced the opposite direction (Jerry's mom had a flair for backing into every spot).

At least he wasn't the only one playing the waiting game. In the twilight, he could see a man and woman in the truck by squinting into the blinding sun. The couple looked like they were arguing, at least Jerry thought he could see arms flailing. They moved back and forth in the truck's cab, dancing without torsos. Tired of the show, Jerry found a bug splatter on the windshield and lined it up on the passenger. Using it as an imaginary crosshair he made an explosion sound and pretended to shoot his target, then made another sound to reload his imaginary weapon and repeated his deadly game to ensure his kill.

That task finished, he looked to the Jetta. Inside it, there was an old man who stared directly ahead, never taking his hands off the steering wheel, nor his eyes off the windshield. Through the open window, Jerry could hear the ticks of the Jetta's idling motor. He decided to spare him — for the moment, anyway.

Finding his favorite station, he was adjusting the volume when he heard a loud crack, like a backfiring car. While Britany Spears crooned her latest hit, he sat rigid in his seat and looked around. His eyes wandered to the old man, but he was still staring straight ahead, hands on the steering wheel.

Jerry turned his attention to the truck in front of him. Still hampered by the dwindling sun, Jerry could see only the driver. The passenger was gone. He continued to stare as best he could at the man for a few moments, trying to figure out where the noise came from, but the unrelenting glare made his eyes water. The man didn't notice Jerry's scrutinizing look and simply stared at the floor of his truck, moving his arms in a downward motion, as if trying to

push something off his lap and onto the floor. Jerry thought his passenger might have entered one of the other stores without him seeing, but that was next to impossible. He would have detected the movement of a mouse in the empty parking lot. Jerry was about to look away when he saw speckles of red on the Ford's windshield that went from the lower middle of the window to the passenger side door.

Funny, they weren't there earlier.

Jerry attributed his lack of observation to boredom and lined up the bug splatter again, this time on the truck's driver. "Kaboom," he mumbled through the music.

He then looked at the man in the Jetta. Proving he was alive and not just a wax dummy, the man's head was turned to an equally old woman who now sat in the passenger seat. She must have slipped in from the fabric store, Jerry thought. The woman handed the older man something and they both seemed to enjoy a good laugh.

For several minutes the couple sat and talked to the beat of the engine's ticks. Jerry was jealous the old man had someone to talk to and incensed he didn't drive away now that he had the chance. The nerve! Jerry would leave in a second if he knew how to drive. He rolled up his mother's window with a flick of a button, lined up a dried, dirty raindrop with his right eye and pretended to make two more kills.

Another loud crack swiveled Jerry's attention back to the truck. By now the mall was casting a long shadow across the parking lot, making it easier to see. Although Jerry quickly found out there

wasn't much there. The driver was gone, leaving behind the same red splatters on the windshield. The dripped down, only blocked by the bug on the windshield.

He thought to himself, could it be?

He moved his face to the windshield and craned his neck to get as close as he could inside the tight area between the glass and the dashboard. The large, green bug was petrified in a cone shaped glob on the lower half of the windshield. It probably played its last game of chicken a few days ago because it was still juicy. There were no body parts, other than a broken antenna.

Two more cracks echoed through the twilight. His sight flew to the rusty Jetta, which was now turned off and missing its inhabitants. The familiar blobs were on the car's windshield, splattered from the inside by some unseen force and slowly oozing their way down the glass like a fat raindrop during a lazy summer shower.

Jerry gulped. Four shots, four kills, and four people missing with a blood trail he knew would lead police right to him. Ha, he thought, the police should be the least of his worries. What would he tell his mother? God, she would kill him.

He had to tell her, though.

He had to get out of the car, find her and make sure she knew it wasn't his fault. There's no way it could be — a dead bug and a dried raindrop can't kill people. Imagination was powerful and his parents encouraged him to use it but was it strong enough to kill?

He didn't want to sit around and find out. He rolled up the windows, pulled the keys from the ignition, pushed the automatic lock button on the door and quickly ran to the fabric store. He caught

his mother as she was leaving.

"Jerry, what are you doing in here?" she was holding three bags overflowing with fabric and sewing supplies.

"Mom!" Jerry said, almost forgetting to breath. He was so nervous he stuttered. "Th-th-the driver of the truck and red car are d-d-d-dead. I think I killed them."

"What are you talking about, honey?" she said with a slight hesitation. "Is this some sort of game you're playing? Because if it is I don't like it one bit."

"No mom, I swear it's the truth," he stammered. "I lined up the bug splatter and the raindrop and pretended to kill the people in the truck and the car and they're dead, mom. They're dead and all that's left is blood and it's dripping down the inside of their windows." Jerry looked at his feet and sagged his shoulders. Feeling helpless he leaned against his mother.

"What car?" Jerry's mom held her son on their way to the parking lot. "That car over there?" She pointed in the direction of the Thunderbird.

Jerry, near tears, looked up in the direction she was pointing and his eyes turned from fear to confusion. The car and truck were gone! The only cars left in the lot were his and the Thunderbird. "That can't be, I thought the people in the cars were dead," he said. "I'm sure of it, mom."

Jerry's mom continued walking, past the Jetta's parking spot, and to her car door. "Are you feeling all right? You look a little pale." Jerry handed the keys to his mother and she unlocked the door. Throwing her bags into the back seat she felt Jerry's forehead,

administering the universal test to see if her child was all right. "You don't feel warm," she said. "Tell you what, for being such a good trooper and letting me shop, I'll treat you to some ice cream. That'll take your mind off this nonsense."

Dumfounded, Jerry didn't answer. He stood next to his mom and scratched his head, staring at the empty parking lot. "I guess," he shrugged his shoulders and nervously turned to look at his mother. "I think ice cream sounds fine."

They quickly made their way to the counter inside Melting Memories. A teenage girl with freckles and long blonde hair was bent over a cardboard container of chocolate ice cream, scraping the bottom of the box. Her hair dangled dangerously close the ice cream, even closer when she nodded at Jerry and his mother.

"What would you like, dear?" Jerry's mother asked. The two looked at the sign hanging above their head. Listed in alphabetical order the ice cream shop had more than 20 flavors to choose from and just about as many non-fat yogurt delights.

The girl finished her task and went to wash the spoon and her hands before coming back to the counter. She stood behind the register and watched as Jerry and his mom made their choice. Jerry, still not quite sure of what was going on, didn't look at the sign above his head, instead he eyed the special of the day: Strawberry Explosion.

The sign explained it best: *Two scoops of homemade strawberry ice cream nestled inside a waffle cone and lathered with an overdose of real strawberry toppings. All this and more for only one dollar, courtesy of Illusion Confusion. It's our way of saying thanks to*

four great years in the Mangrove Street Strip Mall.

"I'll have one of the specials," Jerry told his mom. He loved strawberries. His mother smiled, rubbed his head and put in the order. She even ordered one for herself.

"Good choice," the girl behind the counter said. She quickly made their cones. "These are selling like crazy. We've had people coming in all day for the special and the surprise."

"What's the surprise?" Jerry asked.

"You're actually one of the first people to ask. Most people just order the ice cream and leave," the girl wiped her hands on a dirty apron hanging loosely around her waist and made change for the \$10 bill Jerry's mom had handed her. "Take a bite out of the second scoop of ice cream and you'll find out."

Tipping his head sideways, Jerry bit into the scoop. It exploded with an ear-splitting bang. It scared his mother, causing her drop her cone, and creating another explosion. The ice cream splattered everywhere, covering the girl, Jerry and his mom in gooey streams. It slowly dripped down the front of the counter. Jerry's mom looked like she was about to have a heart attack, while the girl and Jerry laughed.

"I get it," Jerry said with a grin, "strawberry explosion."

"Yeah," the girl said. "The joke shop next door is having a going out of business with a bang sale and they wanted to do something to drive in more customers from our store to theirs. We had two couples come in a few minutes ago, angry as bees, about having the mess splattered inside their cars. I'll give you a new cone of any flavor you want and a 50 percent coupon for Illusion Confusion

Jokes and Gags."

Jerry turned to his mom to make sure it was all right, but she was already on a warpath. Jerry was relieved the other couples weren't killed by his bug splatter.

He watched his mom and the joke store's owner having it out. Using the lowercase "i" in the see-through window sign of the ice cream store, he lined up the store clerk and recorded his fifth kill of the day.

"Kaboom," he grinned.