Who Needs a Man?

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I was brought back to reality by a muffled explosion. “Sam the Van” abruptly began an erratic dance across the road. Frantically clutching the steering wheel, I tried to regain control of a Sam who had developed a mind of his own. Frightened now, I downshifted, stomped on the brake, and came to a shuddery stop. As I eased the van onto the shoulder of the road, I tried to think of what I might have done wrong. Did I hit something? I had seen the yellow gleam of a mountain lion’s eyes in the far distance earlier. I knew that both deer and elk abounded in this area, Surely, I would have seen one of them! I opened the car door, fished under my seat for the flashlight, and stepped out; I didn’t know what to expect as I walked around Sam.

Sam had one very flat tire, passenger side rear. In a state of utter consternation, I stood on the shoulder of that dark secluded stretch of highway staring at Sam’s normally well rounded tire; it was now lying in a small ugly black puddle beneath him. A mere five minutes ago my only concern had been that I reach my brother’s home before they had all gone to sleep. Giving my head a shake, I tried to regain some of my self-possession and begin to think about what I had to do to get out of this situation. It looked as though the time had finally come when I had to put Daddy’s old instructions to a new teen-age driver to the test. I had the sad wistful thought that had he lived just four more years he might have been here with me, to guide me in person. Okay, OKAY! Quit dithering about. Get on with it!

With the flashlight clutched tightly in my sweaty hand, I leaned in to turn on the hazard lights and turned off the headlights. I removed the keys from the ignition and walked to the rear of Sam while a list of what I would need
ran through my head: spare tire; lug wrench; jack; six volt lantern; chock blocks; screwdriver; first aid kit; blanket. It should all be there. As I lifted the hatchback, I whispered, *Thank you, Daddy.* From the day he had given me my first driving lesson, he had insisted that carrying a fully equipped tool box and being prepared for any roadside contingency was just as important as being able to drive. He had built the dovetailed compartmentalized toolbox that I now opened. He had filled it with tools and presented it to me on my sixteenth birthday after I had passed the two-part test and gotten my driver’s license. The untried lug wrench that I took from its bracket in the toolbox lid was one example of his thought and foresight; it was a twenty-two-inch four way lug wrench, better for my smaller hands and lesser strength than the standard “L” configuration. Looking down the dark deserted road I wondered, *Where are all of the men in the world when you need one? Daddy, I sure hope you’re looking over my shoulder.*

When I dumped my armload of tools by Sam’s dead tire, I nearly jumped out of my skin from the racket it made. Until then, I hadn’t realized how absolute the quiet was; my thoughts had been making a lot of noise in my head. After spreading an old army green blanket on the ground to protect my nylons, I turned on the 6 volt lantern, sat down and opened a soiled envelope I had found in the box. I withdrew an old handwritten sheet of detailed instructions on how to change a tire; as I unfolded the tired sheet I prayed that it was still readable. Thank the Good Lord; it was crease-worn but legible.

The first things I did were make sure the emergency brake was on and the gear shift was in reverse. It was lucky that the stretch of road I was on was level. I put a block in front of and in back of the driver’s side front tire and set out safety reflectors about twenty-five feet to the front and rear of the van. Now, I was ready to get down and dirty serious about getting the job done and out of here. I kicked off my heels, got down on my knees, positioned the lantern so that its bright light, that suddenly seemed to be a small and feeble beam, shone on the tire, and I started to work. I pried off the hub-cap with the screwdriver, and loosened each reluctant lug-nut a turn or two to make sure they broke free. I put the jack where I hoped the owner’s manual meant it should go and I jacked Sam up until the dead tire was lifted a couple of inches off of the ground. The jack was a hydraulic scissor jack with an EZ Lift mechanism that Daddy had insisted a lady needed because of its ease of operation. As I pumped on the jack, I envisioned myself using one of the old bumper jacks, up and down, up and
down, just like a pioneer woman pumping water; the mental picture made me grin. An intrepid pioneer woman, me? Intrepid or not, I couldn't help but pray, *Please don't fall on me Sam.*

With the van jacked up and stable (I hoped), I got back down on my knees, and using a crisscross pattern, in accordance with the old old instructions, I loosened one lug nut at a time until they would come off with just a finger twist. I was starting to have a good feeling of accomplishment. Things were actually going pretty well! Using my fingers to remove each lug nut, I was laying them carefully one-by-one into the well of the inverted hub-cap when all of a sudden there was a rustling in the brush behind me. Grabbing the flashlight, I whipped around stabbing the beam of light here and there trying to see into and through the dense foliage. *Maybe I'm not as alone as I thought I was?* The light bounced around in my shaking hand and I dropped the lug-nut that I was holding. It glinted in the light as it rolled away. At that point, I realized I wasn’t alone; a stealthy fear had crept upon me and was keeping me company. As I rescued the nut, I knew I had been there far too long. *Get a move on lady. You've got to get out of here.*

Quickly removing the last lug-nut, I grasped the tire and pulled it off of the studs. It was a shock just how heavy that tire was; pushing it off of my lap, I picked myself up off of the ground and dusted off my front and backside before I lifted the tire and rolled it to the back of Sam. I rejoiced that I was halfway done. Having already fallen on my behind with a tire on top of me, and then hefted the flat up into Sam, it wasn’t any surprise how heavy a full sized, firmly inflated, spare tire was. It would have been easier to roll the tire, but I hugged that going-to-get-me-out-of-here tire to my chest and carried it to the waiting naked studs. It would probably be a little difficult to get a tire lined up exactly right on the studs the first try in full daylight, but with just the lantern, and my shadow getting in the way, I thought I would never get it right. After turning it a fraction this way and a fraction that way for what seemed like forever, it finally slid into place. Before it could change its mind, I quickly put one lug-nut on finger tight followed by the other four. Working in the same crisscross pattern I had used taking the lug-nuts off, I tightened them with the lug wrench.

As I returned to the jack to let Sam down, I no longer felt like the same intrepid pioneer woman I had visualized. I was alone and I was afraid. The trees, the bushes, the quiet, and the night had become menacing. From my dirty hands
and clothes, my hair hanging down out of its neat French twist in stringy tendrils clinging to my sweaty neck and smudged face, to the runny ladders I used to call nylons, I just wanted out of there. I had had enough of this place. When Sam was down on all four tires, I lowered the jack and yanked it out from under him. I quickly gave each lug nut a final tightening turn. A whisper of breeze slithered over me, lifting damp coils of hair and causing me to shiver. I realized that despite being wet with perspiration I was thoroughly chilled.

I ran those long twenty-five feet to the back and front of Sam, retrieved the reflectors, and threw them in the toolbox. I pulled the blocks away from the front tire, picked them up, and they joined the reflectors. As I was bending over, collecting the remaining tools and equipment, and looking forward to being back in the safe haven of Sam, I heard the soft echo of an oncoming vehicle. Rather than being reassuring, the distant sound struck me with additional irrational fear. In a panic, I took the four corners of the blanket and bundled everything up in it. I threw the blanket with the hubcap, high heels, lit lantern, and everything else in the direction of the toolbox and slammed the hatchback shut just as headlights appeared behind me. I had reached my door by the time the driver stopped beside me and asked, “Can I help you?”

Opening Sam’s door and getting in I answered sweetly, “Thank you, but everything is okay.”

The driver, a man of course, only one hour late, waited until I had shut my door and started the engine before he pulled away.

On my way again, with the heater going full blast, I had time to relax and realize I had just changed my first flat tire. My very first, and I did it all by myself, with a little help from a long ago memory and faded instructions. I hadn’t needed a man. I was a dirty disheveled mess, but I thought about how proud of me my brother would be when I told him what I had done - after he got over the initial shock of my appearance. I finally got warm and even laughed at myself and my groundless fears. A feeling of peace and freedom enveloped me. My headlights created an illuminated tunnel as I sped over the dark and seemingly endless two lane ribbon road of the mountain pass. Lush dark foliage bordered the roadway revealing a narrow channel of diamond studded midnight sky high above. A selection of Chopin’s piano concertos played softly on the stereo. All was right with my world.