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Six and a Half Years of Roadkill

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► ***Six and a Half Years of Roadkill*** | Chris Da Rosa
Prose Editor's Choice

Albert Norman was driving his young wife and son to his mother's when he hit a turtle. They supposed it was a turtle; it was too dark to tell. Charlie swore he heard a definite crackling snap like when he'd thrown his jar full of dirt onto their gravel driveway, a high pitched shattering ripple of glass.

Sharon, Albert's wife, creased and smoothed her seatbelt to express her worry. The death of the turtle, if it had actually been a turtle, only caused a mild jolt of fear behind her eyes — a headache — as she wondered if the tire was damaged.

"Eehh, that sounded painful," Albert muttered, constantly glancing at the rearview mirror, "Should I stop? Baby, what do you think?"

"It's fine. Whatever you hit, it's dead." Sharon concluded. They'd been driving for about four hours through Virginia to get to Mrs. Norman's house, and Charlie was fussing. She felt like fussing too.

"Fiiine? I don't tink so! Dad, why don't we stop an' seh?" Charlie, six years old, protested. Sharon eyed her husband as he weighed her verdict and his own doubts about the turtle by waving gum at him. It was cinnamon flavored. She smiled to herself as he grimaced, pushing her hand away. Albert detested unusually flavored anything.

"Charlie, why would you want to stop and see?" He huffed. He supposed even if the turtle was still alive, it couldn't be saved. But was it still alive? What could he have done? He briefly romanticized the turtle's death — it's mouth open, gasping. Broken legs, cracked shell, desperate to live. It was the image of the dying turtle that drew him to the conclusion that its life was beyond medical attention. At most, he only could've run it over a second time. Sharon would have protested.

"It's dead, son. Road kill. Squashed little toes—"

"Albert, that's gross. Do not continue," Sharon breathed. She tried to lean her head against the seat's headrest. It was too high, and the back of her head teetered uncomfortably between the elevated part and the seat itself. Giving up, she looked out the window, focusing on the bright lights underneath billboard advertisements.

When she turned back, squinting at Albert's chin, she saw floating purple dots rise slowly like jellyfish racing to the surface. She blinked, and they started over. It was his chin that led to the creation of Charlie. Square and without loose fat hanging underneath, though his stubble rubbed her like sandpaper when she kissed him — she loved it. They had been drunk, excited strangers in a high from a graduation party. She'd woken up first, naked in the back of his truck in a secluded parking lot. Dressing, she'd pushed his head off her socks — orange stripes — when she noticed his chin for a second time. Albert had found his phone half an hour later with her phone number typed in it along with a voicemail apologizing for the deep bite on his jaw.

"Dad! It's probably lwaying there with is arms out screaming." Charlie thrashed, wobbling his booster seat. There were sandwich crumbs from

lunch wedged in between him and the seat. Very uncomfortable.

"Turtles don't scream, Charlie," Albert said, focusing on the road. It had taken him six months after the birth of Charlie to ask Sharon out and six and a half years to convince his mother to meet her. Two more months followed, assuring Sharon after she overheard his mother say she was a nasty tramp.

"Well whatda dey do when they get hur'?" Charlie asked. Sharon waited for her husband to answer, counting to 20, then 25 before answering.

"You know how their necks are all long and wrinkled? That's because they don't have any vocal cords, so they can't scream," she lied, unsure herself. She awkwardly stretched behind Albert's chair to reach the cooler, pulling down her shirt. He'd left the cooler there so Charlie could reach. Sharon thought he'd just been too tired to scoot it closer to her. The tips of her fingers wedged under the cooler lid, popping it open. After paddling her hand through half melted ice, she pulled out a coke, which Charlie grabbed. His small, fat fingers cried when they couldn't open the soda can. She snatched it back, opening while glancing at Albert to check if he was watching. She slurped loudly because he wasn't, the newly formed bubbles burning her lips and tongue. Both hands on the wheel, Albert's eyes quizzically darted to her smile.

"Here, sweetheart," she showed, passing Charlie the drink. It was too full, she thought, and I drank just enough so he wouldn't spill. See what a good mother I am? Why don't you defend me when you talk to Mrs. Norman?

Sharon wiped her hands on her jeans, wet and sticky from the coke. She pried her shoes off at the heel with the tip of her toes. Realizing they might smell, she put her feet up, tucking them under her jacket. Albert's nose was incredibly sensitive. Nestling her hands in between her thighs, she sighed. Mrs. Norman thought her a parasite to Albert, dragging him from his dreams. To some degree, she agreed with her after learning he'd put aside the Peace Corps and a Masters. Now, working on Walgreens promotions. She tried to comfort herself by focusing on her want to be a teacher and how she'd bravely given that up for Charlie. But Albert hadn't had 10,000 dollars worth of student loans to pay off like she. And a small moral side of her forced herself to acknowledge she'd given up being a teacher long before Charlie.

Charlie, still focusing on a turtle's lack of vocal cords while sipping his drink with two hands, shouted, "That's even worse! That turtle can't even scream! I saw an ant—Dad! DadDadDad! I saw an ant scream. Me an' um, him, that boy, you know? We're drawing wectwangles around an ant hill cause they can't cross id."

"Yeah they can. A dip in the dirt isn't going to change a thing," Albert argued. He worried his mother wouldn't like Charlie; he could be a bit stupid. His speech impediment didn't help.

"Sweetheart, he means chalk. Right, Charlie?" Sharon sharply defended, smiling at Charlie, who bobbed his head vigorously, "Albert, the anthill was on the sidewalk and they chalked a border—"

"I get it, I get it," Albert interrupted, impatiently tapping the steering wheel. He knew Sharon enjoyed correcting him.

"Yeah, we was chalkin' — see this scrape on mah finger? My chalk was tiny an I scwaped my finger." He thrust his hand high in the air for his parents to see a tiny scab.

"That's your knuckle, Charlie."

"Stop correcting him, dear. He's only six." Sharon defended, glowering. Let him tell the story!

"And I accidently ran over stupid ant who was trying to cwass the rectanble befoh it be done. And it was blue and squahed — Dad. Listen! And it wifted up is head and looked at me wيتد invisible eyes and screamed. Dad!" Albert forced himself to look up in the rearview mirror, feeling Sharon's tense annoyance. Controlling.

"How do you know it wailed, Charlie?" He asked politely to prove he was paying attention. Wrong question — Sharon's eyes snapped at him, propping her legs on the dashboard so he could smell her feet. Did a child have to explain every detail? Seriously, Albert.

"Is mouf was open, Dad! And its legs were-were pushing up-! I couldn't hear id scweam cause it didn't have vodal cords! Like the turtle! The turtle's cweaming Dad!" Charlie waved, furiously kicking his legs. His coke toppled from the cup holder, glugging down the boy's pants.

"Aaah, MomMomMOM!!" He howled, shoving the can off his lap. It rolled to the dirt stained floor, still glugging.

"Shoot, Charlie, can you reach that? I think we have napkins somewhere. Didn't we get McDonald's, Albert? Well? Didn't they give us napkins? Charlie, just – hold still, you're making a mess," Sharon ordered, frantically leaning over her armrest to sop up what she could, jamming wet napkins in a cup holder as she unbuckled. Swiveling over her purse and travel bag tucked between their seats, she reached her son, telling Albert off when he suggested pulling over. She was tired of anticipating meeting this horrid Mrs. Norman.

"We're already late as it is. I can clean him here. See?" She settled by her peeved son, pulling out a bath towel from Albert's suitcase. If she used the water from the cooler, maybe he would be clean enough for Albert's mother.

"Charlie! Stop crying! Don't spaz and get over it," Albert scolded, repeatedly peeking at his wife's distressed face.

"Gaah, Al. It's not that bad. Don't scold him! He's just a kid — can you grab me an outfit?" she shouted over Charlie's fussing. Didn't he remember Six Flags? At least your son didn't puke all over the window this time.

"I can't, gotta watch the road," he said. He always took the back road to his mother's house. It was dirt and full of potholes. If he wasn't careful, he'd run over another turtle. Sharon snatched the travel bag in between their seats, the strap whacking his arm.

Charlie allowed himself to be buckled next to his booster seat. Sharon crammed herself behind the cooler, her arm wrapped around her son in case Albert's driving got them in another wreck. The cooler was moist against her jeans. She pictured herself from Mrs. Norman's perspective. Wild, disordered hair. Empty chip bags scattered on the floor. Charlie not in a safe seat. She'd probably refuse to let them inside the house after calling DSS. Red and yellow lights flashed, blinding her.

"Looks like . . . an ambulance?" Albert stopped in the middle of the street. He threw himself out of the car as if it disgusted him, running to his mother's driveway.

Sharon patted her son on the head before climbing into the driver's seat and moved the car over the curb. The dim light of the car's headlights and warning flashes vaguely connected her to a strobe light as she pieced together a traveling silhouette of a stretcher. Charlie shouted excitedly, asking if they could ride in the ambulance. She ignored him, taking out her hair and sagging against the seat. A calm sense of relief trickled in her heart, spreading like medicine from a shot. Perhaps Mrs. Norman had a stroke. Perhaps she'd forget who Sharon was. An obligatory thought of concern wafted gently over her head in case Albert asked how she felt later.

"No, sweetheart, we can't. How about I get you inside and clean you up? Then we can have some tea to calm you down," she smiled, unbuckling their son.

"K. And honey? Honey honeyhoney? And then we can make a pwtend gave for da turtle."