

The Good Samaritan

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Another car just missed him as he ran back to the snowbank. Both lanes were bare, which helped. At least he knew the cars would always be in a fairly straight line, no ice to avoid. He had just begun the letter 'L'. 'H' and 'E' were already done in the eastbound lane. He was making his sign to be read by the cars going west. Two hours had told him that much. Of the very few cars going by, more went west. The eastbound cars would straddle the 'H' and most of the 'E'. But, a truncated 'E' was still readable. Now he was starting the leg of the 'L'. It began at the end of one of the white lines in the middle of the road.

The 'P' finished, Thomas Cahill propped himself against the snowbank and counted his cigarettes. Four left. It was after four o'clock now and getting even colder. He lit one and drew slowly on it, looking at his letters. A car going east did just as he wished—straddled the 'H' and sliced the 'E' in the same place as the others had. He walked to his car. Under the hood the confusion of wires and hoses was unchanged. For the hundredth time he thought about horses. And, for the hundredth time he wished he knew something about cars. About these kind of horses. Running his hands over the wires, wiggling the ones on the plugs, he heard it coming; felt it through the soles of his boots. Which way? He turned and saw it. There was nothing he could do but watch. The tractor-trailer came roaring from the west on the eastbound side of the road, its cloud of snow swirling behind it. He waved frantically but too late. It had hypnotized him and

passed. Where it had passed was an amoeba-like mass of snow writhing on the highway.

He slammed the hood down; the noise jarred him. Dropping his dying cigarette, he got inside the car; felt the absence of the wind. Almost two hours had passed since he'd come to a stop here, the dead wheel in his hands. He turned the key; a whirr and nothing else. Again. The whirr was weaker. He got out and crossed the road.

The new 'H' was finished before another car came. During this work he stopped to wave at cars. But they were so few and so fast. He went to his car, opened the hood, and left it up.

At the end of two hours, Thomas Cahill stood by his car again. His work was beautiful; four white letters on the black road. They showed up even more in the near darkness. There had been no more trucks. And, the only two cars to go by had straddled the 'H' and 'P' as he had planned. A feeling of pride flashed through him. It excited him. Still, no one had stopped, or even slowed. It was dark now.

Thomas Cahill thought once more of why he had left New Jersey. Not just because he wanted to work with horses. It was because of this feeling. He liked it. He never had it in New Jersey. Because it was the old "man on his own" feeling. A Robinson Crusoe thing. An American West thing—that one man could do something. And he, Thomas Cahill, alone with the elements, had done something. Undefeated by the elements, he had in

fact used them. The pride in his ingenuity and the success of his planning was beautiful. It even warmed him for a moment. He felt good. He thought about all the people in the cars who must have thought he was laboriously placing perdition in their path before he finished the 'P'. Like the crazy conservation nut taking the 'S's off the Shell stations in Ohio. Secretly he had laughed at that and been happy the guy was never caught.

He took his second cigarette and, lighting it, realized that night now crackled around him. He smiled as he bent over his cupped hands. The Marlboro ads floated through his head. Instinctively he straightened his shoulders, pulled his collar up higher, his hat down lower.

Far away he saw headlights. He jumped in the car and turned the switch. The lights came on. He leaped out and stood in front of the left headlight, waving. As the car came nearer he glanced to his right. 'HELP' gleamed in the night. He smiled. The car slowed. The lights blinded him and the car that belonged to them was just a black shape. The shape slowed more, swerved sharply but gently into the left lane and back, neatly crossing all the letters. Then it was gone. He stared after it, suddenly limp. His letters were only unconnected pieces of snow on a black and empty highway.

Thomas Cahill was cold. Very cold now. He wanted a fire. There was nothing but the owner's manual in the glove compartment. Lights from an approaching car cut into his eyes from the rear view mirror. He got out and, sheltering the manual with his body,

held a match into the hanging pages of the booklet. Flames seared his leather glove and withered into the night above his hand. The car went by.

The crumbling ashes curled, red edges going black, before they vanished from his sight. And he was cold. His face pained him. He couldn't feel his feet. He thought more about a fire. But the snow between him and the trees was too deep. He'd tried to get there before. When he wasn't cold. When he was Robinson Crusoe. But he hadn't tried very hard. Because he wasn't really alone. Crusoe had been alone when he made land. As long as the cars went by, rare though they were, he was not alone. Suddenly he was aware of a new dark. An intense dark. Every nerve in his body centered on his stomach and wrenched it. The lights were gone. His lights. He'd left them on. He clawed the matchbox out of his pocket. In the matchfire his watch glimmered. It had ticked away an hour. And he didn't know it. It was lost. He struggled to remember what he had been doing, to have his mind remember what it had been doing—where it had been for an hour. It wouldn't work.

The wind became unbearable. It seemed to grow louder. He raced for the door, stumbling on his numbing feet, and got in. The metal thudded together and was quiet. He struggled with the two cigarettes, took one and lit it. It tasted vile. He got out, stamped it into the snow and wandered to the snowbank. The snow tasted fresh. The smooth, soft flakes melted on his tongue and slid down his throat.

He whirled around, almost falling. Thomas Cahill knew that sound. Horses. Several of them. With ice shoes on. People who had horses were different. He was saved. He moved toward the road, realized he was looking for headlights, caught himself and laughed. Sent the snow still in his glove sailing up into the night. The sound was getting louder. He took the last cigarette—forgetting the experience of the third one. The match flared in his eyes and he stared at the flame until it disappeared against his bared fingers. He didn't understand, and, with great difficulty, lit another match. The match connected with the end of the cigarette, which crackled slightly. He leaned against the car listening. The sound was still there. And louder. He began walking toward it. His pants leg caught on the rear bumper and he fell. The sound stopped. The horses were gone. He rolled onto his back and stayed there. The stars approached and receded. Approached and receded. Their rhythm was the same as his. The skin of his neck touched his collar when the stars approached. Fell back when they receded. It was friendly. He slipped off his other glove and touched his neck. He felt nothing. He pulled back his sleeve with his teeth and put his wrist to his neck. He felt no warmth, only the pulse in his neck touching his wrist ever so slightly as it approached and receded.

Thomas Cahill turned his head where it rested on his arm. The cigarette glowed in his other hand, a foot or so from his eyes. He watched it now, his pulse forgotten. The red end was all he could see. His view was interrupted. Once. Twice. Again. It was snowing. The stars were gone. The wind was gone. He smiled; remembered the horses. He wanted them to come again. Horses were friendly in the snow. Snow falling made everything friendly. It quieted down the world. Like packing between glass bottles. The

pieces didn't rattle. Things didn't break. It seemed like nothing got broken when it snowed. Thomas Cahill didn't see the cigarette burn out, but he heard a horse. Only one. He heard it breathing.