

Honorable Mention, Fiction

Line of Sight

by Bryan Z. Kile

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Jimmy rolled over, slowly opened his eyes and saw a faint bit of light around the blinds on his window. *“Good, I can sleep a bit longer.”*

As he tried to drift back to sleep, an all too familiar noise jarred him awake. He groped for the cell and finally hit the answer button.

“Hullo?”

“Jimmy Grayson?” The woman’s voice sounded bright, yet serious.

“Yes,” he said hesitantly.

“Do you know a Sandy Portofino?”

Fully awake, now, Jimmy sat up and in a loud, quavering tone, said, “Yes! What’s wrong?”

The lady then identified herself as a nurse and said, “Sandy’s been in an auto accident. She’s been admitted to City Center Hospital and has been asking for you. Can you please come over right away?”

“I’ll be there as fast as I can,” said Jimmy as he leapt off the bed and began digging in his dresser for clean underwear. He quickly brushed his teeth and ran a comb through his shoulder length brown hair. Jumping in his car, he gave a quick thank you prayer that it was daylight. Jimmy knew it was dangerous and wrong for him to drive at night – the vision in his one good eye made it too difficult.

He knew the hospital very well. It was where he had the many surgeries that ultimately led to losing the vision in his right eye. He turned quickly into the parking garage nearest the ER and punched the button for his ticket. He grabbed the stub and raced up the ramp, only to realize: *“It’s dark in here! I can’t believe the poor lighting they have.”* He cursed the hospital management for not realizing how this must be a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.

He drove slowly with his bright headlights on and finally found a parking space. Jumping out of the car, he sprinted to the elevators. As he stood waiting, he pulled out his cell and recorded a note: *“Contact hospital management about parking for people with limited vision.”*

Jimmy found Sandy’s room and tapped lightly on the door before entering. A tear came to his eye when he saw her hooked up to machines and a pole laden with medicine bags and tubes running to her arm. Her dirty blonde hair was all messy and her bright blue eyes were kind of dim. She gave a weak smile as he rushed to her side and took the hand that was free. As she quietly told him what she could recall of the accident, the tears began to stream down his face.

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Sandy wasn't really his girlfriend, she was a girl, a couple of years older than Jimmy, and a really good friend. He called her his "night driver." They met just after he lost the vision in that one eye, and she began to help him through that trauma. The friendship grew into a trusted relationship, helping each other in many different ways.

She was somewhat sedated and groggy but well aware that he was there for her. As he sat watching her sleep, he thought back to how they met. He was at the ophthalmologist's office the day after his last surgery on that right eye. There was a big bandage over it making him feel very conspicuous. Sandy came in with her mother who had a similar bandage. As they began talking, he learned that Sandy's mother had just had cataract surgery. Sandy was so sweet and caring when she learned that his case was much more severe than her mother's. As they chatted in the waiting room, they learned they had a lot in common. Jimmy was called to the exam room first, and said his goodbyes to her, expecting to never see her again. As he returned to the waiting room, he was almost in tears. Sandy and her mother had seen the doctor, but remained in the room to hear Jimmy's news. Seeing the pain on his face, Sandy rushed to Jimmy. He told her the bad news – they couldn't save his eye. She instinctively pulled him to her and held him as he struggled to hold back the tears. They exchanged phone numbers and he thanked her for caring about him, a total stranger.

As Sandy drifted in and out of sleep, Jimmy sat thinking about the early days of their friendship. They had similar tastes in food and enjoyed the same kinds of movies. While Jimmy worked at home, Sandy was a part-time receptionist at a company downtown. They quickly became friends. While at this point it was still a platonic relationship, there were times that Jimmy hoped something romantic might come of it.

A knock on the door interrupted his reminiscing. A police officer came in to question Sandy about the accident. He had slightly graying, short-cropped hair and a bit of a "beer belly." He introduced himself as officer Andrew Stewart. As he began discussing what had happened, Jimmy learned that someone had forced Sandy off the road and driven away. "A hit-and-run?" Jimmy asked the policeman.

"Yes," Stewart said, "the other driver bumped her car, then drove away."

As Sandy recalled what she could, Jimmy learned that the other driver actually had stopped, watched Sandy's car roll over, and then drove off into the night. His blood began to boil. *How could anyone do that?*

It was then that Jimmy realized her mother was not there. He asked about her, and learned that she was on a tour in Europe and would not be back home for two more weeks. Because of her travels, they had trouble reaching her. By the time they found her, Sandy was out of danger and insisted her mother finish her "trip of a lifetime."

The next day, Jimmy came into Sandy's room. He had a stuffed panda bear, her favorite, and a determined look on his face. He asked how she was doing, but Sandy knew him well enough to know something was going on in that deep mind of his. She got right to it: "What's up?"

It wasn't until then that he told her of the parking garage problem. He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. "I wrote a letter to the hospital administrator. I was hoping you would feel up to helping me edit this. You're so good with that kind of thing."

"Of course I will." As she started to reach for it, she realized her right arm movement was limited by the IV's in her hand and the blood pressure cuff on her upper arm.

Jimmy placed the paper in her left hand as she said, "Guess I'll just have to tell you if something needs correcting and you'll have to write it down."

The letter was well thought out and Sandy only found a couple of grammatical problems. It pointed out the problem Jimmy had, reminding the Administrator that he was surely not the only person with this problem. He suggested they might have a special parking pass with outdoor parking spaces for those limited to daylight driving.

A few days later, Sandy was released from the hospital. Jimmy, of course, was there to take her home. He insisted on taking her to his home and caring for her a few more days. After getting her settled in his spare bedroom, he checked the mail and found a letter from the hospital Administrator. He rushed into Sandy's room so they could share it together.

"Thank you for bringing this problem to our attention. Unfortunately, there is little we can do. We believe that if we were to establish our own solution, it would be abused by those not truly vision impaired and would be unenforceable. We suggest you contact the state about an additional level of handicapped parking for those who can only drive in daylight."

The letter did, at least, include the name of the person to contact at the state level.

Jimmy had another issue he was working on but with little luck, so far. He had not told Sandy about it until now. "I've been after the police to see where their investigation of your accident has taken them. The short answer is: *nowhere!*"

"What do you mean?" said Sandy incredulously.

"I mean, they claim, because it was 'hit-and-run,' they have little to go on. But I've been doing some investigating on my own."

"What does that mean?"

"It means I went to the junk yard to look at your car. Did I tell you it was totaled?"

"No, but what did you find?"

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"I found significant paint streaks of red down the side of your blue car! When I asked the police if they had tested that paint for make and model and checked repair shops for matching damage, they were kind of vague in their answer."

"What?!"

"That's right! They basically said they had too many more important cases to spend much time on yours. I suppose it takes a death for them to think it's important enough to follow up!"

Being a computer geek, Jimmy earned a comfortable living by setting up and maintaining web sites for a fairly wide circle of friends. In the periods while Sandy was sleeping, he worked on updating those sites. As he was cruising the internet, he noticed an ad for a nearby auto repair shop offering a paint job to "spruce up your car." He clicked on the ad to check it out, but all he got was a pop-up with the address and phone number. When he googled the name, he came up empty. Then it hit him. *I'll go by there tomorrow and see if they can help me identify the paint and track down the car that hit Sandy.*

Just then, Sandy was waking and called for him. She told him, "I'm starting to remember some more details about the accident. It was a big vehicle, probably an SUV. I also remember that there must have been several people in it, because there was a lot of laughter as they hit me. It was like they did it intentionally."

"I can't believe anyone would do that on purpose, put someone else's life in jeopardy," he replied angrily. "I'm going to call that Officer Stewart and tell him."

When Jimmy got off the phone, he was more angry than before.

"What did he say?" asked Sandy.

"He said they would add that 'bit of information' to your file. More of the 'it's not important enough to matter' crap they've given me before. Will you be okay for an hour or so? I've got an errand to run."

"Sure Jimmy, take your time. I'm feeling much better – physically. But I'm as angry as you about the police not pursuing this. By the way, has anybody told my insurance agent about the accident?"

"No, I never even thought about that. What's his name? I'll look him up and give him a call."

"Her, Jimmy. My agent is a lady."

"Oh. Sorry about that."

"I have her number in my cell. By the way, where is my cell?"

"It must be in your car. If you write a note saying it's okay, I'll go by there and pick up your personal stuff from the car."

"Great. Thanks."

When Jimmy collected Sandy's stuff from the car, he pulled out a baggie he had in his pocket and scraped some of the red paint into it from the fender of her totaled car. He used her phone right then and called the insurance agent. Maria asked him how Sandy was doing and a few details about the accident. When she learned where the car was and that Jimmy was calling from the junk yard, she asked him to wait there, saying she would be there in ten minutes. While he waited, he called his house and told Sandy he found most of her things and asked if there was anything else she could remember he needed to look for.

Maria was right on time and, after looking at the car, Jimmy filled her in on all the details: Sandy's recovery, the things she was remembering about the accident, the lack of concern the police seemed to have, and his plans to do a little detective work. Maria thanked him for meeting with her and said she would have the adjuster contact Sandy. Jimmy gave her his home and cell numbers, reminding Maria that Sandy was recuperating at his house.

Jimmy headed back to the house to check on Sandy. When he got there, he found Sandy sitting at his computer typing something. "Whatcha up to?" he asked.

"I got to thinking about your problem in the parking garage, so I started writing a letter for you to send to that guy at the state government office. I figured you've helped me so much, that's the least I could do."

"Thank you, but, I hope you're not overdoing it."

"No, I'm fine. It doesn't take much physical energy, just mental." A few more strokes on the keyboard and then she said, "Done! Why don't you read it and see what you think?"

Jimmy read through it quickly and responded: "I couldn't have said it better myself. I'll print an envelope and get it in the mail today."

Jimmy fixed some lunch for them. After eating and cleaning up the dishes, he drove over to the auto body shop he had seen advertised on the internet. He located the manager and explained his problem, showing him the paint scrapings he had taken from Sandy's car. Karl, the manager understood immediately. He commented, "It really is sad the way the police treat some victims like your friend, Sandy. I've got a guy who does paint matching for me. He could probably take these and tell me what make and model the car might be and possibly the year, too."

"Thanks, that would be a great help. Then I can contact body shops and see if anyone has brought a matching vehicle in for right front damage."

Karl replied, "I can do better than that. I belong to a group of body shop owners and managers and will contact them by e-mail and have answers – within a day, probably."

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Jimmy was ecstatic! "How can I repay you for such great help?"

"Don't worry about it. I like to see justice done, too," Karl said.

Reflectively, Jimmy added, "You know, I discovered you through an ad on a website, but I couldn't find your website. Do you have one?"

"No. I looked into it, but it was just too expensive."

"Hey, man, I do websites for a number of friends – and I think we've just become friends. Can I set one up for you?"

"That would be great. Thanks!"

"When Sandy's doing better, probably next week, I'll come by and talk about what you want on it and how you want it to look. In the meantime, I'll be waiting by the phone to hear what you find out about the car that hit her."

Jimmy arrived home and handed Sandy the bag of items he had retrieved from her car. She dumped the bag out on the bed and said, "Wow, I didn't realize I had so much stuff in my car. Is it really totaled? I loved that little car."

"Yes, Maria agreed with me that it looks totaled. The adjuster will make the final decision."

"By the way," she continued, "I think I'm well enough to go back to my place. I've mooched off of you long enough."

"Are you sure?" asked Jimmy. "I'm getting used to seeing you around here all the time."

"I need to get back to work, too!"

"Okay, okay. I'll help you back to your place tomorrow. It's kind of late in the day to start that now. Hey, I need to check if the mail has come. Maybe we will have heard from that guy at the state office about my parking concern."

The mail had come, but no letter from the state. Jimmy thought, *Maybe I need to write my State Representative, too.*

He mentioned that to Sandy when he got back from the mailbox. "Do you know who your State Rep is?" she asked.

"Uh, not really. How do you suppose I can find that out?"

"I bet the state has a web site that would give all that information."

"Now why didn't I think of that?" said Jimmy as he sat down at the computer. With a few keystrokes, he was on the state web site and quickly found the name and office address of the man who represented his part of town. Sandy, he discovered, had a different representative. *That's good, he thought, we can each write to our own representative and maybe get double action that way.*

He pulled up the copy of the letter he had written to the man the hospital suggested. With a few changes, it was perfect to send to the state representatives. He wrote one for himself and one for Sandy, addressed envelopes and got them ready to mail. *We need to get some action on this!*

The next morning, as Jimmy was putting Sandy's things in his car, the phone rang. It was Karl from the body shop. "We got a hit on the make and model of the car you're looking for. It was a 2008 GMC Yukon. I've sent out the information to my friends all over town. The only problem with that is some of the guys will want to protect their clients. Maybe now is the time to call the police in and try to get them moving on this. That way, the shop owner will have to give up any information they have."

"Hey, thanks man. I owe you big time! Be thinking about that web site. I'll be glad to do it for you."

Next, Jimmy called the police and asked to talk with Officer Stewart.

When the man came on the line, Jimmy could hardly hold back his excitement. As he related what he had done, the officer just grunted and said an occasional "uh huh."

When Jimmy finished, he asked the officer how quickly they could get on it. Officer Stewart was kind of non-committal. Jimmy pushed him, saying, "Look, man, I've done the detective work you guys couldn't be bothered with, but I can't force garage owners to give up their customers names. Only you guys can do that."

"Okay, okay. I'll get it sent out and see what we can come up with." Stewart responded grudgingly.

As Jimmy hung up the phone, Sandy said, "Man you got tough with him. I'm proud of you for standing up to the cops like that."

"Hey, girl, nobody messes with my best friend and gets away with it!"

"Best friend? Wow, I didn't know I ranked so highly with you."

"You are a great friend. I'd do anything for you."

As they pulled into Sandy's driveway, a tall handsome man with black hair, greying at the temples, got out of a car parked in front of the house and approached Jimmy and Sandy as they started for the house.

"Sandy Portofino?" the man asked.

"Yes," Sandy responded cautiously.

"I'm Brian Blackstone, an insurance adjuster. Your agent, Maria, had me check out your car. She was right, it's a total loss. I have a check here for the replacement value."

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"I'm sorry," said Sandy. "This is my friend Jimmy Grayson. He's been helping me recover at his house. I'm just now getting back home. I hope you haven't been waiting long."

"No, only a couple of days" said Brian, jokingly. "Actually I just got back in the car after trying your doorbell. I was about to call Maria."

"Let me get the door and come on in for a few minutes."

Sandy led Brian into the living room, while Jimmy got the rest of her things and brought them in. He laid them on the kitchen table and then joined the other two in the living room.

"How do we know this is the true replacement cost?" Jimmy asked.

"I'll show you here in the NADA book."

"Thanks," Sandy and Jimmy said in unison. Sandy continued, "That'll help as I decide what I want to look for."

"I understand there is a lead on who caused the accident," responded Brian.

"Yes," Jimmy said, "we've got a lead on the kind of car and I just spoke to the police officer about an hour ago with that information. They are supposed to be canvassing the city's body shops."

"They're pretty slow about those things. Maybe a call from me will help get them moving," said Brian. "I'll let you know if I get anywhere with it." Brian turned and headed for the door. As he did, Jimmy noticed Sandy's eyes carefully following him. He was surprised when he felt a jealous twinge arise in his mind.

As Brian reached for the door handle, Jimmy's cell phone rang. Brian hesitated to see if it pertained to the accident.

"Yes, Officer Stewart. I'm really glad you called. Thank you so much for moving on this so quickly. Yes. Sandy's right here. I'll put her on."

"Yes," said Sandy, "I'll do anything you think will help. Twenty minutes? I'll be ready."

Brian had returned to the living room to hear the conversation. Jimmy related that they had found the suspect vehicle at a body shop across town and identified the owner.

Sandy chimed in, saying, "Officer Stewart is coming by to pick me up on the way to the owner's house to talk with him."

Brian said, "That's great! If we can prove that it was the car that ran you off the road, we can recover the costs to you – vehicle costs, your medical costs and probably enough to cover the cost of a brand new car as well."

Sandy was resting on the sofa, while Jimmy worked on her computer, updating a couple of web sites. The ringing doorbell got both of them on their feet very quickly. It was Officer Stewart. "Hi, Sandy. Do you remember me? I'm Officer Stewart. I spoke with you at the hospital right after your accident."

"Yes, I remember – sort of."

"While we ride to the owner's house, I need to ask you some more questions about what happened that night. Do you remember anything more?"

As they drove away, Sandy began to relate other details she remembered. "I remember that the vehicle was fairly large, like an SUV and there were apparently several people in it, because I remember lots of laughter. I also remember that they stopped after hitting me but then drove off."

Officer Stewart looked somewhat pleased. "I wanted you to come with me, because this sort of thing often turns out to be kids being reckless. I wanted the owner to see you still bruised and scratched up."

At the owner's house in an upscale neighborhood, a distinguished gentleman answered the door and had a bit of a surprised look on his face.

"Richard Smithfield?" Officer Stewart said.

"Yes?" the man said cautiously.

Stewart came right to the point, asking Smithfield if he owned the vehicle in question. The man immediately acknowledged that he owned such a vehicle, but was in the shop because of some damage his son had caused to the right front fender.

"What did the boy tell you about that?" asked Stewart.

"He told me he and his friends were downtown and got too close to a light pole while parallel parking."

"Is your son home? I'd like to hear him tell his story. May we come in?"

Smithfield had a puzzled look on his face. He offered the policeman, Sandy and Jimmy a seat in the den area, then went to the stairs and called for his son.

Rick came into the room. His face went white when he saw the police officer.

"Son, I'd like to hear what happened when your dad's car got banged up," said Stewart.

The boy began to stutter and look around the room – anywhere except at the police officer.

Stewart continued, "Did you really hit a light pole, or was it another vehicle? This young lady here was run off the road the night you banged up your dad's car. She saw the vehicle that hit her and, oddly enough, it was the same make, model and color as the one you were driving."

Rick broke down and began crying. Finally, he blurted out between sobs, "I'm so sorry miss. I'm sorry, Dad. I have done a terrible thing. I hurt this lady and I lied to you. My friends and I

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were having fun. It was a prank. We just wanted to kind of bump her car and run it off the road. When we saw it roll, we panicked and got out of there.”

The officer said, “You must realize, son, that this is a very serious matter. You will have several charges filed against you for which you will have to go to court. You will likely lose your license for at least a year.”

Immediately Mr. Smithfield said, “We’ll cover all the costs. I’ll see to it that the other parents are informed of this and penalize their kids as well.”

“Please let me know when you have talked with them. I will need the names and addresses for each of them,” said Stewart. “I think it’s important to see them in person.”

He rose to leave and helped Sandy out of her chair. She was still limping some.

As they arrived back at Sandy’s house, the officer’s phone rang. “Yes, Mr. Smithfield. Thank you very much. My e-mail address is on the business card I left with you. Would you please send me those names? Okay. Thanks for getting back to me so quickly.”

“Mr. Smithfield tells me he has contacted the other parents. He also said he will pay all of Sandy’s expenses. The boy and his friends will have to earn the money and pay him back. He also said that the parents of the other kids in the car have grounded their kids for six months, just as he is grounding Rick.”

After the policeman left, Jimmy went to his house for a few things and to check the mail. When he got to the mailbox, there it was: a letter with an official state legislature return address. He nearly tore the letter trying to get the envelope opened while running inside to call Sandy at the same time.

He read it to her over the phone:

Dear Mr. Grayson: We here at the State Legislature understand the concern you have expressed to us and have been doing some research on the subject. While we can find no other state that has offered a solution to the problem you have experienced, we feel we have an adequate solution. We will be introducing a bill in the next few days that calls for a separate level of disability parking for people like yourself who cannot drive at night and are challenged by dimly lit parking garages. This additional level of parking will have a special placard to be issued by the Motor Vehicle Department, on the orders of an ophthalmologist. While we cannot immediately require businesses to provide the needed parking spaces, we will be asking them to recognize the need and begin planning for this level of disability parking. For those places that do not have space for outside parking, the bill will also include a requirement that adequate lighting be

provided in their parking garages. Our engineering department will be working to determine what that level of lighting should be.

Thank you for bringing this to our attention. I'm sure other states will hear of this and follow suit in the near future.

"Wow!" said Sandy. "You really got them working on this and got some real results in short order."

"You, my friend, were the one who wrote the letter for me. You played a big part in this effort."

"I guess my accident had something good come from it."

"Yes, but most importantly, you're okay. Do you think you'll feel like going back to work on Monday?"

"I think so, I feel pretty good, now."

"I have a couple of web sites to update, and then I'll be over and fix you dinner."

As Jimmy was walking through the door to Sandy's house, her phone rang. "Yes, Brian," said Sandy. Jimmy, moved a little closer to hear what she was saying. That twinge of jealousy was there again. As she hung up, Sandy thanked him for his help, and turned to Jimmy.

"Brian Blackstone says that the insurance company is going to help me get my new car and will be collecting from the Smithfield's insurance company. All of my expenses will be covered."

"Well, this has been a really good day! We heard from the state and they are going to see that something is done to help people like me. *And*, the police finally did their job and got results, too. Thank you my friend," said Jimmy.

"Thank you, my friend! You're the one who got the police moving."

"That's what friends are for! They see you through the tough times, and look forward to the good times."

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The protagonist, Jimmy, is loosely based on myself. Like him, I only have vision in one eye. Like Jimmy, I find it difficult to use parking garages. As a result, the creative process of this piece developed around the need for better lighting in many garages. I have learned that, in areas I frequent, only certain garages are ones where I can safely drive. Sometimes, that means having to walk a little farther to get to my destination.