

THE KEY

Written by Christian A. Dumais

Darren Gardner stood in the car rental office. It was a bright sunny morning but still midnight for him. His wife Greta patiently waited outside with their luggage. Two jetlagged Americans in Paris ready for adventure but in need of a nap.

The woman at the desk asked Darren if he wanted the insurance, he said no, he was an American, he was a safe driver, had been driving for over fifty years. This all sounded inarguable in Darren's head, certainly better than "I'm too cheap to pay for your insurance." She said if he forfeited the insurance, then it was important he have "the key" with him at all times. "Of course," he said, thinking that was just common sense. The woman exhaled heavily and gave him more papers to sign.

A tall man in a black suit was standing with Greta when Darren stepped outside. He was handsome with tanned skin, black hair and blue eyes. Greta was laughing at something he said, and she was winding her hair around her finger, something Darren hadn't seen her do in a very long time. The man shook Darren's hand politely. It was hot. Darren could already feel the sweat forming in the back of his shirt, but the man looked as cool as January.

When the car arrived, the man opened the door for Greta, much to her delight, put their luggage in the trunk, and then got in the back. He saw the confusion in Darren's face and said, "I'm Laqui." And it was then that Darren realized "*la key*" which he took to mean the French's way of saying "*the key*" actually meant "*Laqui*." He turned back towards the office and then back to the car, and because Darren never liked to acknowledge his mistakes – especially those made in his quest to save a dollar – he got into the driver's seat as if everything was right as rain.

Greta never once questioned why Laqui was with them. For the first few hours, all she did was talk nonstop about how she had always wanted to come to Europe and how they decided to drive across the continent like they did once back in the States with their kids before they grew up. Laqui nodded politely and asked questions.

By the time they stopped to get some gas, Greta was fast asleep. Darren got out of the car and it wasn't until he removed the nozzle from the pump that he realized Laqui was standing right beside him, a little too close for his American sensibilities. A car pulled up behind them and the driver stepped out, stretching. He waved and said something in French.

"I'm sorry," said Darren. "I don't understand."

The man smiled and stepped forward, saying, "Ah, you are Amer—" before falling to the ground. It was like watching a marionette getting its strings cut, the head hanging back like a bowling ball in a sack. It happened so fast that Darren's mind wasn't able to

process that Laqui had shot the man in the head. The gun's silencer made the shot sound like a playful sigh.

Pshoo.

A young man at the next pump jumped towards Laqui –

Pshoo.

– and fell just as fast, his life over before his knees touched the ground.

Laqui turned to Darren and said, "That'll be enough." Darren let go of the handle, not realizing he'd been pumping gas the whole time. "Leave the money on the pump."

They got back on the road with Greta still sleeping. It took Darren eight miles (12.87 kilometers) before he had the courage to speak. "You kidnapping us?"

In the rearview mirror, Laqui frowned. "No," he said as if offended. "Mr. Gardner, you agreed to this."

In a hushed tone, to not wake Greta, Darren said, "To kill people?"

"That's unfortunate," said Laqui. "You didn't read the agreement."

In fact, the agreement stated (in both French and English):

Any person not registered in this agreement who enters an unreasonable distance to the vehicle can be subjected to property damage, serious injury, maiming, disfigurement, desecration, torture, and/or death.

Darren would read this in the 29-page agreement weeks later in his living room. He had returned home 19 pounds lighter and missing a tooth. By then, fifty-two people from five different countries were dead. More would have died if it weren't for Darren actually physically pushing people away from the car. One person had punched him – hence the tooth.

Darren had seen a lot of terrible things in his life. Even though he basically arrived in Vietnam just as the war was ending, he saw enough to get the point. And for all the awful things he hadn't seen in real life, the internet had more than made up for.

But the moment that haunted Darren, especially when it's quiet at night and sleep won't come, was that afternoon in Germany. Greta was gone by then. Who knew that asking to go home removed oneself from the rental agreement (Article 17, paragraph 2)?

Pshoo.

He had pulled off the autobahn to find a place to eat (no drive-thru, he had already learned) when he had almost hit a boy on his bicycle crossing the road. And he was too relieved and full of adrenaline to notice the backdoor of the car opening and Laqui thrusting his gun forward with the surgical grace of a dancer. The boy was thrown

off his bike by the impact of the bullet in his chest before Darren even heard that awful sigh.

What Darren remembered was the burning in his eyes and the snot rolling down his lip as he screamed at Laqui to stop. He remembered the elegant way Laqui got back into the car, the grip of his hand on his shoulder, and the annoyed look on his face in the rearview mirror when he said, "I'm surprised at you, Mr. Gardner. You Americans should be used to this kind of thing by now."

Christian A. Dumais is an American writer and university lecturer living in Wrocław, Poland. He has published fiction, journalism, and academic articles in several magazines and journals, with recent pieces published in *GUD*, *Shock Totem* and *Ha!Art*. He has written a collection of short stories, [Empty Rooms Lonely Countries](#), and created, edited, and contributed to [Cover Stories](#), a euphictional anthology of 100 stories inspired by songs.

He is also the creator behind Twitter's [@DRUNKHULK](#), which has over 100,000 followers. Boing Boing wrote that Christian "is one of the three or four people who make it seem possible that Twitter can spawn something like art."

Christian is currently working on a novel.

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