

I

Even before George realized that the beige Ford van was following them, he had felt a sense of growing anxiety. He did not like to drive in the dark, especially along strange roads. His calculations had not allowed for the fact that the sun would dip behind the high Western peaks at least an hour or so before the published time of the Colorado sunset. He did not like human error, and that included his own.

“Getting darker,” he mumbled between clenched teeth, glancing, with some guilt, at his wristwatch. Birdie smiled, amused by his irritation.

“Poor baby. Lost without your computers,” she teased, digging her fingers into the funnybone above his knee. He had agreed to drive west from Denver only if he did not have to drive in the dark.

“Cut it out,” he snapped with mock waspishness. But her gesture had cheered him.

“You couldn’t foresee that the plane would be an hour late or that it would take nearly an hour to rent the car or that those peaks would be so high. Really, George, you can’t control everything.” She rubbed her thin white hands along his thigh to placate him. Placing his hand over hers, he squeezed.

“We could have stayed on the outskirts of Denver,” he said. But the girl at the Hertz desk had suggested the scenic route, old number 40 to 125, through the Arapaho and Routt national forests, then up to Rand. They had a Holiday Inn reservation near Rand. Tomorrow they would drive through the Arapaho wildlife refuge, then double back to 40 via Route 14.

“It’s like a foreign land,” Birdie said, settling back to watch the spreading shadows along the timbered mountains, the play of odd

light effects, especially above the timberline, where snow coated the peaks like heavy white paste.

“We were supposed to relax. And already it’s not relaxing.”

“Go with the flow. That’s what the Doc said,” Birdie replied.

She was always amused by his carping. It gave her a chance to tease. Besides, it was the freedom of breaking routine, of doing the opposite thing, that made this Western vacation romantic, she thought. Something completely different, as the comedian had said on the Monty Python Show. Different from Manhattan. Different from their jobs. Different from the routine of city life. And they had never seen the West.

He pulled the car over near the road’s shoulder. Taking the map from the glove compartment, he studied it while Birdie traced the red Magic Marker line with a slender finger. Designating their path, it arced imperfectly between the major interstates from Route 70 to Route 80.

“It’ll get dark just when we’re in the middle of the forest. Nothing is scenic in the dark.”

“Except you,” she said gaily, snuggling up to him. “If you like we could sleep in the car.” She kissed his ear.

“You’re being L and L.” It was one of their many little code expressions. “L and L” meant lecherous and lustful.

“The height,” she agreed.

He put the map in the glove compartment and gunned the motor. It was then he noted that the beige van, which he had observed only peripherally, had stopped a few hundred feet behind him. When he started his car, it started.

Coincidence, he decided, pushing the idea from his mind. Because the road wound in sharp hairpin curves as it climbed, he guided the car carefully up the sloping terrain. City living had made his driving rusty and the tires squeaked as he wrestled the wheel on the sharp turns. The van, he noted, was more stable in its maneuvers, indicating a more experienced driver.

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“Hard to believe,” Birdie said, admiring the passing slopes. “Don’t *you* look!” she cried, as the tires squeaked on a curve.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said with annoyance. The road dipped and climbed, following the harsh contours. He had also not made allowances for this obstacle course. On either side now was solid forest with barely a break in the treeline. Occasionally even the peaks disappeared and he seemed to be navigating in an impenetrable sea of timber.

As they climbed, the sporadic traffic thinned and there was only their little rented Plymouth Fury and the beige van on the road.

“Damn,” he cried, as the car made too wide a swath rounding a curve. He had been looking into the rearview mirror, and hadn’t seen the curve come at them so swiftly. “If there was a car coming from the other direction—zap, splat!”

He wasn’t really good at hiding his anxieties. She looked at him curiously and noted his eyes shifting between the review mirror and the windshield. Turning in the seat, she looked back.

“Tell me what you see.” he said.

“A van.” It was getting dark now and the van’s driving lights were on.

“Can you see anybody inside?”

“No.” She could not understand his line of questioning.

“I think they’re following us.”

She turned to look at him again. Following?

“Of course, they’re following you. How else are they to move along this road?” She wondered if this was another one of his deadpan jokes. “On roads people follow each other. There is simply no alternative.” She giggled nervously and touched his thigh again.

“Watch now,” he said. Ahead, he could see a straight stretch of road with a big dip in the distance. Flooring the accelerator, his foot pressed against the carpet and the car shot forward, straining all cylinders until every inch of the vehicle vibrated. The speedometer labored upward, then moved forward as the car hit the dip, declining again as it nosed upward.

“See,” he said. The van had accelerated in tandem, keeping the distance intact. She admitted his logic, but she did not want to exacerbate his fear. He had a tendency to imagine enemies. Ambitious people are like that, she had told him, certain of her insight.

“They’re playing,” she said. “People play.”

“I don’t like people to play with me,” he said, watching the van in the rearview mirror.

“Not even me?” she said, putting her arm through his.

“Only you,” he said. Pausing, he looked again at the rearview mirror. “I’m having trouble enough with this thing without that.”

“Would you like me to drive?” she asked coyly. Actually she knew more about cars, mechanical things. But her driving was even worse than his.

“I’m not ready for suicide,” he said. Suddenly, he was determined not to transfer the core of his fear to her. Besides he only wanted to appear concerned, not frightened. He calculated that he was still nearly two hours from the motel. Darkness was descending swiftly now.

“Some scenic route,” he said. In the mirror the van seemed to be gaining on them. “Are they getting closer?”

She turned and confirmed his speculation. The van was getting closer.

“Maybe they want to pass,” she said, determined to be cheerful.

“We’ll soon see.”

He eased his foot on the accelerator and the car slowed while the van closed the distance between them rapidly. When it came within a few feet of their car, it slowed down, maintaining a similar speed.

“They’re tailgating,” George said. He felt his heartbeat pump in his throat.

Birdie looked back. Bending slightly, she could see two vague faces behind the windshield, teeth grinning behind heavy beards.

“A pair of meanies,” she said, feeling now the edge of fear.

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He opened the window and thrust out his arm, waving them forward. It seemed the only sensible response. Suppose they really did want to pass, he thought. Suppose it was all in his mind.

The van shot out from behind their car and drew parallel. The side window was open and a bearded face looked at them and sent a stream of brown juice in his direction. It was deflected harmlessly by the wind. Then the van shot forward, pulled back into their lane and slowed down.

“What do you call that—nosegating?” Birdie said. The wisecrack fell flat.

“I don’t like this. Not one bit. The bastard spit at us.”

“They’re crazy,” Birdie said.

“And it’s getting dark and this road is pretty deserted.”

“Duly noted,” Birdie replied. She was trying vainly to hold back her fear.

“Hold on,” George cried, flooring the gas pedal again and shooting out into the opposite lane. But the driver of the van had also accelerated, making it impossible to get back in the proper lane.

“My God, they won’t let me in,” George said, with mounting rage. The driver of the van, a scrofulous, bearded creature, lifted a hunting knife and made repeated throat-cutting gestures. The man beside him lifted a bottle to his mouth.

“Drunk,” George groaned.

Slowing, he fell behind the van again. Then he stopped the car completely. The van sped forward and disappeared around a curve.

“Maybe they’ve finished their games,” Birdie said, relieved, gripping George’s arm. “My hero,” she said, cuddling him. Starting the car again, he made a swift U-turn and headed in the opposite direction.

“I’m not going that way. That’s for sure,” George said, flooring the accelerator. The blackness came swiftly now and he switched on his lights. For the first time he realized that the back of his shirt was soaked through.

“Feel my back,” he said. She moved her hand to his moist back.

“Wet and cold.”

“The clammy hand of fear.” It was, after all, appropriate to joke about past fear.

“And very nearly one wet seat,” he said, the tension easing.

“Two,” she said, holding up two fingers before his eyes.

But the relief was shortlived. Two bright headlight beams in the rearview mirror momentarily blinded him.

“Them?” he asked, as she turned in her seat and squinted into the beams. The beams flickered briefly and she was able to confirm the answer.

“Them.”

“What the hell are we going to do?” George asked, genuinely perplexed. His hand gripped the steering wheel. He was certain his knuckles were white.

“Just keep driving,” Birdie said.

“With those brights in my eyes I can barely see ahead of me.” He twisted the rearview mirror, but the brights caught on the sideview mirror. “They’re ubiquitous,” he hissed.

“Keep cool,” Birdie said. She had often bucked up her courage with such a command. She squeezed his arm to reassure him and herself.

“Some vacation,” he said.

At a winding stretch of road, he had to slow down and the tailgating van made fender contact, banging the Fury forward.

“Now I know they’re crazy,” he said. It was still too dangerous to accelerate.

“If we had a CB radio . . .” Birdie began. It was the kind of gratuitous information that could only inflame the situation further. If only this or that, he thought. What good did that do? She was only making things more difficult.

“Just don’t panic,” he said.

When the patch of winding road straightened, George gunned the motor and again the van shot forward in pursuit. This time it

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did not hesitate parallel to them, but moved swiftly into position in front of their car. Then it slowed down and George was forced to decelerate.

“We could stop again,” George said. “And go back in the other direction.”

“We could,” Birdie said gently.

“We could do that all night or until we run out of gas.”

They both looked at the fuel gauge. It had moved precariously downward.

“This doesn’t happen to us. It happens to other people,” George said, his mind groping for possibilities. The road’s edges were thick with trees. He had been searching both sides of the road for some time now, he realized, the natural response of a beleaguered human being searching for the way out of a dilemma. Stand or flee, he thought with sarcasm, remembering the biological imperative.

Birdie was fishing in her purse.

“Put that away,” he commanded. It was her Swiss knife, always the object of his scorn, a symbol of her Mr. Fixit propensities.

“The hell I will,” she said with bravado, although even the sight of chicken blood made her squeamish. She continued to hold the unopened knife as she fished again in her pocketbook for a cigarette.

But the sight of the knife, the potential weapon of defense, punched home the reality. I’ll kill them if they lay a hand on her, he screamed inside himself, feeling the ball of anger expand in his gut. It was not reassuring. He had never confronted violence before, not in the flesh.

The van suddenly stopped dead. George jammed the brakes of the Fury and the inertia pushed them forward, the seatbelts restraining them. The resulting shock dulled George’s responses and it wasn’t until the bearded men were fiddling with the car’s locked doors and pounding on the windows that he was able to regain his presence of mind. The men delivered karate chops to the doors and glass.

George put the car into reverse and pressed hard on the accelerator. Apparently one of the men, who had been pounding on the rear window, jumped to the roof to avoid being run over. Swiftly George twisted the wheel and headed the car into a U-turn while the men still clutched at the sides of the car. They heard a scream and an obscenity as the man who was on the roof slid off and hit the ground with a thud.

"This is madness," George cried, as he headed the car forward toward their original destination. Birdie looked out of the back window into the darkness. A spiderweb-like crack covered most of the glass.

"Monsters," Birdie said. She was shaking now and her teeth chattered. Neither of them had ever faced this kind of mindless danger. They had both felt the fear of walking down a dark street in Manhattan, the fear of an attack. But it had never come. Now this, as if the other danger had finally happened.

The car sped forward over the darkened road while Birdie peered out the rear window. Occasional road lights threw eerie shadows on the asphalt.

"Why?" Birdie whispered.

"Freaks," George replied. Fate, he wanted to say. They had simply crossed their vision at some point, dead center in their aberration. Were they seeking thrills? Rape, perhaps, or worse? My God. He shivered.

"Maybe we lost them?" George said, an empty wish. Perhaps the man who had slid off the roof was really badly injured. He shrugged off the optimism, certain that his most recent flight had enraged the pack of predators.

"Something back there," Birdie said suddenly. Her eyes were growing accustomed to the dark, "Without lights."

He pushed the light button of the Fury and the road ahead was plunged into sudden darkness. He slowed down, waiting for his eyes to adjust. Her eyes spotted the outline of the van still moving toward them.

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“It’s them. They’re coming.”

“Again.”

She looked at either side of the road.

“Maybe we could slip into a side road.”

“I’ve been looking,” he said, accelerating the car again. “It seems like a solid wall of forest.”

The van was swiftly gaining on them now, and the darkness provided little security. All sets of eyes had adjusted to night vision. Then the van was upon them again, banging against the rear of the car, like some terrible savage animal.

“This can’t go on,” George cried. He did not have to see the fuel indicator to imagine how low it was. There was little time for reflection, only the inner admonition that at all costs they must get away. Escape!

Even with the accelerator pressed to the floor, the four-cylinder Fury was no match for the powerful van, which hammered away relentlessly at the rear end of their car. The sweat continued to pour down George’s back.

“Go away,” Birdie screamed, a senseless gesture of helplessness. He patted her leg to calm her.

The van swerved and drew parallel again. They could see an angry, dusky bearded face looking down at them, crowding the Fury onto the shoulder of the road. There was little room between the shoulder and the edge of the wall of forest.

George swung the wheel in the direction of the van, slamming into its metal frame. The van edged away momentarily, then slammed back on the beleaguered Fury. They could feel the scraping and creaking of the damaged metal as the heavier vehicle rammed against it.

“Hold on,” George cried, jamming the brakes. Birdie felt the pressure on her chest as the shoulder strap ate into her flesh. But she was determined not to show him her pain.

Quickly, he swung the car in a U-turn and headed in the opposite direction again. His arms felt heavy. The leg that manipulated the

accelerator pedal had begun to twitch. Ahead in the distance, they saw two headlights approaching them.

“Blink the lights,” Birdie said. He reached for the light button and moved it in and out of its socket, stepping on his brights. It was a station wagon.

Responding to his manipulation, the lights of the oncoming car blinked on and off like a Broadway neon sign. Then it slowed down. In it they could see a man, a woman, children, a dog. Birdie rolled down the window on George’s side and crept behind him as he moved forward.

“Help us,” she screamed with her head out of the window. “Help us.”

She could see, briefly, a man’s face, irresolute and confused. Then the car was gone, heading away. “Don’t ask for trouble,” she imagined the man saying, although the lingering guilt would give him an occasional twinge of pain.

“What’s wrong with people?” she asked bitterly, moving back to her seat beside George.

“Would we have stopped?” George asked, but there was little time to ponder the answer. The van was bearing down on them again. As it drew near, its brights went on, drowning them in a frozen circle of bright light. The brief burst of light confirmed to George that the fuel gauge had reached the danger point.

“That’s all we need,” George murmured.

“What the devil do they want with us?”

“We’ll know soon enough,” George whispered. The hint of resignation alarmed her further. What did they want? In her mind, she could project the image of her own rape. Bear-like men repeatedly violating her body. Perhaps she could save them both by acquiescing. It was another scenario and she felt drawn to it, preparing herself. She had consciously refused to contemplate the possibility of death.

After turning in pursuit, the van again drew parallel and began to crowd the Fury onto the road’s shoulder. Its high beams lit up the solid wall of forest.

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“There. Ahead,” Birdie cried. It was a break in the treeline, a narrow road. She could see the outline of tire ruts on its surface.

“I see it,” he shouted, jamming the brakes as the Fury drew beside it. Its wheels squeaked and slid as it fell back from the relentless side-ward pressure of the van, which was already attempting to decelerate.

George pushed the automatic gear level into reverse and backed up to the road’s entrance. Then, flicking the car into drive, he surged ahead, smashing one side of the car against a tree. The impact sheared off a fender. They could hear the van reversing on the main road and by the angle of lights knew that they were still being pursued.

The road was bumpy. Parts of it had softened in the spring thaw and their wheels slid on the soft ground. Behind them, they could hear the big van’s wheels trying for friction as it maneuvered toward them.

But the lighter Fury was more agile on the tentative surface and, lights ablaze, George was able to move forward by holding his wheels firmly in the tire ruts.

In fits and starts, the Fury proceeded into the darkness, making an enormous racket as it rolled over the uncertain terrain. Birdie, who did not have his steering wheel for support, felt the pain of her bones beating against hard surfaces, as the car’s vibrations bounced her helplessly.

“Are they still following us?” George asked, maneuvering the car precariously. It was not built for this kind of travel. Its clattering noises filled the air, drowning out any other sounds.

Braking the car, George turned off the ignition and they both listened for audible signs of their pursuers. In the distance, they could still hear the whining sound of the van’s wheels as it forced its way over soft surfaces. In the clear night air, the sound’s distance was impossible to estimate.

Starting up again, he moved the car forward deeper into the forest. He had lost all track of time. The road narrowed and curved sharply.

By the accelerator's pressure he judged that they were climbing, but the forest's wall left no clue to height or distance. To steady herself, Birdie had grasped the seatbelt. Its edges were painful as it pressed against her skin.

The extreme concentration on keeping the wheel steady had taken his mind off the fuel problem. A missed beat in the engine brought the matter home again.

"There," he said as the sputtering began. He floored the accelerator, hastening the last gasp as the engine—like some exhausted beast—died in a spasm of agony.

"Fine," he said, sitting back, feeling strangely relieved. In the distance, they could still hear the rumble of the van's pursuit.

"Persistent bastards," he sighed, opening the car's door.

She undid her seatbelt. The sound of it unclicking made him turn toward her. Somehow he had decided that she was the potential victim, and he felt a tremendous urge to protect her.

"Keep cool, darling," he said gently.

"Cool?" The reference was oddly confusing. "At a time like this?" she mumbled.

Her legs felt shaky on the soft ground and the air was sharp and chilly against her cheeks.

"We better get the hell out of here," he said. The sound of the van seemed closer. Hold on to your presence of mind, he urged himself as he opened the car door and pulled out the keys. Unlocking the car trunk he pulled out their luggage. She picked up her purse. They both wore sweaters over their sporty traveling clothes. Lifting the two suitcases, he started through an opening in the trees.

"Let me help you," she said, reaching for one of the suitcases.

"It's all right," he mumbled, although it seemed ridiculous. He could barely fit through the narrow gap between the trees. "This is ridiculous," he murmured with irritation, when it became impossible to move.

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“Let’s hide them and come back when it’s light.”

He felt strangely annoyed by her suggestion. It was all so ludicrous. Why were they here? How had they lost control over their lives? In the silence of indecision, the sudden absence of sound seemed encouraging. Apparently the van had stopped.

“Do you hear voices?” she asked. They strained, heard what seemed like twigs crackling, the thump of footfalls and faint human voices. The sound compelled action, and he put the suitcases in a hollow and covered them with what felt like damp compost.

Without comment, he moved ahead along a line that seemed like a trail. At this point, one direction seemed as good as another.

She walked behind him, her ears alert. She was thankful that she had been practical about her clothing—wool slacks, comfortable walking shoes, a sweater. It was still cold in Colorado in May, the travel agent had said.

Leading the way, George heard snapping twigs under his feet and the crackle of dry leaves. An occasional night bird let out a shrill unfamiliar sound. Sometimes they had to jump over fallen trees strewn in their path. Once he fell, scraping his knee and tearing his slacks. It was another irony of their condition. They had spent hours together, picking out just the right cut of trousers. George was finicky about the way he dressed.

At intervals they stopped, ears straining. In the thin air sound carried, although distance was confused. Muffled voices confirmed another human presence. Them? Others? Their eyes met in the darkness, confirming, then enhancing their mutual terror.

They started to run. Moments later, his shins banged against something and once again he fell.

“I’m not built for this,” he said with disgust, sitting forlornly on the edge of a fallen tree, rubbing his shins.

“Better bruised legs than cut throats,” she whispered. Even her whisper seemed a shout in the clear air. They moved off again in a clumsy jog.

Occasionally they stopped to catch their breath and listen, clutching each other. Strange forest sounds played tricks with them. Around them, they sensed movement—or imagined it.

“Animals?” he asked.

“What’s the difference?”

“How the hell did we get into this mess?”

“You remember. Something to do with starting a family.”

“I hadn’t planned to end one,” he said. The wisecracks were losing their humor. They moved again, not talking. He could hear her puffing breath behind him and the heavy pounding of his own heart. Finally he stopped again, trying to comprehend time and distance.

He bent down to feel the ground. It was cold. Leaning close to her, he could see the whites of her eyes, as if they had captured the only available light, and he could feel and smell the familiar breath of her. He gathered her body against his, feeling her narrow bones, her thin shoulders—her fragility.

The closeness warmed them but also made them conscious of the biting chill in the crisp air, something that their terror and excitement had masked. Her cheeks were icy. Reaching for her thin hands, he noted that they, too, were like icicles.

“You okay?” he asked.

It was a question often asked when a dream had brought a special panic. The query was familiar. Often she would be relieved to find herself in the familiarity of their bed, his smooth muscular arms holding her close, soothing her.

“You think we’re both having the same dream?”

“A nightmare, I’m afraid.”

“Will the alarm ring soon?”

Suddenly he heard a distant sound and placed fingers over her lips. Branches rustled and creaked nearby. A bird screeched, answered shortly by another, then a brief cacophony like a symphony orchestra tuning up. Dead leaves crackled.

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Releasing her, he moved ahead between taller trees. He could not find the strength for speed. As they moved, the sound changed, more muted now. The ground, too, seemed different. There was a special smell about it as well, like rotting vegetables laced with pine. He bent down and felt the odd softness on the forest floor. They were moving over a carpet of pine needles.

Even in the dark, he could sense that they were following no set pattern. Occasionally they would miss seeing a tree and bang a shoulder on the trunk.

“Careful,” he warned. He felt Birdie grip one of his belt loops.

The soft silence of the pine forest seemed to offer a sense of security. Above, the sky had vanished in a pall of blackness. They continued to walk. Finally, all sense of time disappeared and their movements were endless, beyond direction.

It was only when he felt the pull on his belt loop become burdensome that he realized the pitch of the ground had risen and they were walking, puffing rather, up an incline. After a while he paused and turned toward her.

“Tired?”

It was another special signal between them, the question asked merely to confirm his own feeling or desire. Like “Hungry?” or “Sleepy?” or “Chilly?”

“You?” It was another tentative response. Even here, she wondered why she responded in that way. Of course she was tired. So was he. Then why couldn’t he just say it?

“A little,” she answered. Dammit, she told herself, I’m exhausted.

“Some vacation,” he said suddenly, the sound emitted as a hiss, like air escaping from a balloon. She ignored the outburst, and he was immediately ashamed of revealing this edge of bitterness.

They continued to walk upward, with some diminished speed. Finally he gave in and leaned against a tree trunk, his chest heaving.

“What do you think?” he whispered.

They listened to the forest sounds for a long time. The sounds had changed, muffled by the carpet of pine. How long had they been at this cat-and-mouse game? He felt the ache in his leg and chest muscles.

Exhausted, she squatted on a patch of pine needles. "I've got to stop," she said.

"You think it's safe?" It was a question he had planned to ask himself, but he hadn't dared.

"How can we know?"

It was not the confirmation he needed. "We can do this all night."

She caught the nuance. "Do what?"

"Answer questions with questions!"

"All right then, I declare it safe." She didn't mean it, of course, but ebbing strength was limiting their alternatives.

"I'm glad you said that," he muttered, trying to take the edge off her sarcasm, further annoyed by his own testiness. They were silent awhile. He still leaned against the tree trunk. Finally he slid down beside her to the chilly ground. Gently, he nudged her.

"Sit here." He patted her lap. Shrugging, she let him help her.

"We both don't need a cold ass," he said, holding her in a bear hug with both hands. "I'm snarling and irritable," he said.

"I know." She paused. "So am I."

"With cause," he sighed, "with cause."

She saw him close his eyes, then he shook himself alert again.

"Do you think it was the car?" he asked. "Something set them off—something *about* us."

"George, let's face it, it was just another random, senseless act. They were fired up, looking for trouble. We came along. Fate."

"We'll be okay," he said after a while.

"Sure," she whispered. She felt his chest rise and fall in a steady rhythm.

When she was sure he was asleep, she raised herself from his lap and gathered up armfuls of pine needles. Then she spread them over his body and her own.

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It was only then that she lay down, looking upward at the void of blackness overhead and wondering if they had truly escaped. Escaped what?

For a moment she listened again. Then she slept.

SAMPLE

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