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Ginny escaped north over a four-lane stretch of U.S. Highway 99. The sun hung low in the west and the roadbed shone, stretching across the flats like a river of red. She drove a nineteen fifty-six cream-lacquered Chevy Belair. Only five years old and still perfect, the car flew through the miles and kicked up a wind that lifted Ginny's brown curls and cooled her neck. That rushing air brought welcome relief from the heat that, despite autumn and oncoming night, flooded the desert.

Her children slept in the back seat, their young bodies so small they seemed to float on the plush felt. The dreamer in Ginny wanted to curl up between them, but she kept her hand firmly on the wheel. Unlike Ginny, the Chevy had only ever known her husband's kindest touch. She thought, if I let go of the wheel, this car will sail right back to Frank. She sat up straighter and shook away the lulling stillness.

Retrieving the hand she had draped out the driver's side window, she eyed the clouds bellying up against the ridges in the east and clicked on the radio hoping for a weather forecast. Instead she got news about Hurricane Hattie's strike in British Honduras. It was horrible news, but Ginny shut the radio off, and with it her sympathy. For her, even a killer wind like Hattie was but a minor squall compared to the eleven-year tempest of the marriage she now fled.

That morning, as soon as Frank's rusty Ford pick-up--with his hunting rifle gleaming blue in the rear window--had turned out of sight, Ginny had dug out her old green suitcases. She'd set them open on the living room floor, and circled the house gathering things Brenda and Danny would need. When their pajamas, socks, color books and toys were packed, she'd added the other things she absolutely couldn't leave--things like her marriage license and the kids' birth certificates. As an after thought, she'd included her blue suit and pumps. It's 1961, she'd insisted, women can work these days. I'll get a job.

Last night, creeping into bed next to Frank, bruised from the beating she'd taken to keep him off

the kids, she hadn't thought of leaving him. Even now, she wasn't sure her flight was real. Eleven years, she calculated, four thousand mornings. What was different today? She'd made him coffee, fetched his boots, fried his eggs crusted with salt and pepper, and filled his Zippo. All things she'd done day after day, so many times it was ritual, liturgy, prayer for peace.

Now Ginny was in a kind of daze, wondering to find herself heading north into the night, and she jumped when a stone whipped into the undercarriage with a loud crack. It was only a rock, but the light outside had cooled to a watery glow and clouds banked high in the northeast. The fine copper hairs on her arm bristled in a sudden chill. She rolled the window closed and glanced in the rearview to check the kids.

By the time she'd gotten them ready to leave that morning, the sun had risen high and hot. After an hour fighting traffic, she'd stopped at a Texaco for a fill-up and to give the kids a quick break. Then she'd picked up the 99 off Sepulveda Boulevard, and nosed the car onto the highway just as the DJ on KWIZ announced headlines at ten o'clock. By one, Danny had been cooped up in the car about as long as any four-year-old could stand.

Ginny had parked the Chevy and set up a picnic for the kids under a spreading elm in a grassy strip alongside the Kern River just outside of Bakersfield. She'd fed them sandwiches, apples, and Lorna Doones, trying for the kids' sake to force her smile up to her eyes. Nine-year-old Brenda hadn't been fooled. Low-voiced, she'd asked, "Where are we going?" The question had hung in the dry heat, full of words that weren't spoken, no less solemn for the crumbs clinging to Brenda's cheek.

"To see Grandma."

"Why?"

"Drink your milk," Ginny had said, pouring some from Brenda's Minnie Mouse thermos and knowing she was taking the easy way out. She'd been grateful that Brenda had let it pass. She'd poured milk for Danny from his thermos--Huckleberry Hound--and then coffee for herself, from Frank's cast-off stainless steel bottle. Then, she'd sipped at the stale liquid and watched her children play.

Now the kids sprawled on the seat, full and tired. The rock's impact hadn't broken their dreams.

They must feel safe, Ginny thought, to sleep so deep. She was thankful, but the cold solitary responsibility for their safety scared her. She caught a glimpse of her stricken face in the mirror, and thought it looked ill-prepared, even bereft of purpose, like the empty-eyed maid she sometimes thought she saw in the moon.

To the east a moon did rise, spinning through the black clouds in a temper, bruise-blue and rimmed in orange. Frank's moon, Ginny noted, aware that the thought made no sense, Frank's eye. And she wished that the clouds would hide it.

WATCH FOR ROCKS, the sign said, and there was another thunk against the Chevy's frame, a sound just like the car keys clunking on the grey Formica table when Frank had tossed them down that morning, giving in. Hung over, he couldn't stand her wheedling and whining, but Ginny didn't know why she'd asked for the car in the first place. She'd had no plan, then.

He'd said, "No, I'm not leaving you the keys to my fifty-six." He called the car, "My fifty-six," as he always did, and why shouldn't he call it his? He took care of it. He was the reason the engine always ran smooth as velvet. It was his labors that gave the body a shine like cream and silver satin.

Frank loved the Chevy, and whenever Ginny saw him leaning into the secret places under the hood, when she heard him crooning "Since I Met You Baby" while rubbing out the wax, when she saw his brass-blond hair fall over his brow while he studied the purr and whine of pistons

and belts--that's when Ginny loved Frank. Yesterday, she'd watched him from the picture window. He'd danced around the Chevy, all grace and muscle, chamois in hand. He was poetry. He was the man Ginny had spoken to when she'd said "I do."

But the name on the title was Virginia Harding. It was her car, a gift from her stepfather when she'd left Carson City to be Frank's wife. "Just in case," he'd said, "you ever need to come home." And she'd be there with her kids before morning's light. Ginny had called her mother from a booth at a Shell station in Merced; she was expected.

Sacramento swam in her eyes, a dreamlike interlude of street lights and tight-shut storefronts. Ginny thought briefly of getting a bed for the night, but she needed to get past the mountains to feel safe, so she swung the wheel right at the junction on Folsom Boulevard. U.S. 50 would take her east over the Sierra at Johnson pass and straight across the State line into Nevada.

An hour later, Ginny pressed her foot on the accelerator as the Chevy began to labor on the incline. The sun had long since failed and dark drenched the sky like spilled ink. The moon, blanched to silver, revealed a denser wall of black peaks ahead. Frank would be there, Ginny realized, somewhere in those very mountains. "I'll be hunting," he'd said, and those crags and crevices south and west of Tahoe were his favorite grounds.

In the mirror's frame, barely lit, Danny shuddered in his sleep and Brenda yawned, not quite awake. Ginny thought again of Frank and his rifle, and she shivered. Then, she set her shoulders and leaned into the climb. No rest, she decided. She'd push through before Frank could even catch her scent.

The road took the car and its passengers through a cleft in the hills, and the strip of sky visible through Ginny's windshield narrowed. Black-iron clouds began to extinguish stars by handfuls, and soon even the moon crept into hiding.

Distant lightning flashed, illuminating Ginny's hands as they clutched tight to the wheel. Her eye was drawn to them. They were foreign, unknown, and so small. She wondered how they could be expected to sail three thousand pounds of metal and glass through a night gone suddenly dangerous and deep. She worried for the soft-shelled bodies of her children.

Thunder shattered the clouds, then, and within minutes a torrent began to run in the road. Chunks of center line squirmed in Ginny's headlights, fighting their way upstream. She leaned forward to see them better, her only guides in the storm's feverish violence.

They were high on the mountain, now, right in the middle of the squall, and it seemed to Ginny they'd been there forever. Without warning, Danny bolted upright and screamed, "I want my Daddy!" Brenda was awake, too, tense and wary as a cat, gripping the arm rest with fingers like claws.

Ginny tightened one hand on the wheel and lifted the other to wipe sweat on her dungarees. Then, she switched hands and repeated the process. "Sit down," she said in a try for control, but Danny kept screaming. He'd sit if Frank told him to, Ginny thought, and then she remembered how Frank took care of the car, took care of her, took care of everything when he was sober. If he was here he could watch over us all. She almost wished for him, but she touched her cheek and it hurt and then she remembered his thick scarred knuckles, balled into a fist.

Near Echo Summit the gale wind blasted the car's chassis with hard, heavy raindrops. Thunder rolled overhead, close and crushing and loud. Lightning sizzled so near that Ginny jumped, flinching, and tasted its heat. Again, in that moment Ginny wanted Frank. She would have given almost anything for his broad chest and strong arms to take control.

She thought, I can't do this, and that's when the Belair lurched and shook and scattered rocks leaving the roadway. On the wide shoulder, the car hissed to a stop.

The engine didn't stall. Ginny sat silent in the orange glow of the dash lights and remembered the flames of candles she had once lit for Frank, hoping for romance. Her cheeks were wet, a remote fact she loosely aligned with the world outside, with the falling rain. A wall of water sheeted down the windshield's empty glass. She bit her lip, becoming aware of pressure behind it--a scared cry wanting out perhaps, or loneliness.

Ginny pushed the shift lever up to Park and turned to look at Brenda, who sat cupping knees in hands, looking sun-washed and innocent and smelling of cut grass. Brenda's eyes were deep and brown and Ginny had been told they much resembled her own. She didn't see herself there, though--only a conflicting creed that was purely Brenda. In her daughter's bold, mocking stare, she saw Brenda's faith that her mother would save her from this night, but equal certainty that Ginny could only fail. In Frank's absence, Danny invested his faith in Brenda. He leaned on her arm, still crying but apparently comforted, no longer needing to scream.

Ginny tightened her lips and turned away from them both.

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back on the top of the seat. She made an image behind her lids: the Chevy a snow globe, glassed in and undisturbed, she and her children trapped but safe within. When she looked again, she was startled to find she could now see some distance ahead. What she spied out there felt like a miracle. A hundred feet away, square in the yellow path of the headlights' beam, was a sign. A rectangle on white stilts legs lettered in the beige of old bones, it proclaimed:

Stanislaus National Forest

DEER VALLEY CAMPGROUND

RIGHT, 2 MILES.

"Thank heaven!" Ginny's relief burned in her too-tight throat. Brenda spread her arms across the back of the seat and read, "Two miles." Ginny smiled faintly and touched her daughter's arm like a rabbit's foot, for luck. Then she put the car in gear. Pulling hard left on the wheel to overcome the lip of asphalt, she guided their rolling shelter back onto the highway.

The storm fought them as they traveled deeper into it. Ginny drove with all her attention, thinking ahead only as far as needed to keep the car on the road. Rain splashed. The engine steamed. Brenda's arms embraced the back of Ginny's seat, and Danny clutched his sister's elbow. "Mommy," he asked, "where are we?"

Ginny said, "We're almost there," but silently she wondered if perhaps the sign was wrong. It seemed to be taking too long to drive two miles.

Just then the Chevy began to pick up speed and momentum. They were traveling downhill. They had passed the summit.

She was sure they must be close to the turn-off, and she strained forward squinting into the rain, scanning for the campground entrance. Headlights appeared out of the drenched darkness, the first she had seen since the storm began. The driver dimmed his lights, and Ginny looked up as a heavy truck--a Freightliner like her step-father used to drive--drew near.

The crossed beams of headlights and the glow of the truck's dash created an unlikely light in the cab, and Ginny could see the man's face clearly from her vantage higher on the grade. His shoulders were solid and sure behind the wheel. His brow, beneath a pushed back leather cap, was furrowed in concentration. But when their eyes came briefly level he met Ginny's

gaze, nodded, and smiled encouragement. They passed, and she listened as he worked down through two more gears to power his truck to the top. The confident sound of the engine imparted strength. Ginny took heart from the driver's smile, gleaned courage from a stranger's concern.

"There it is," she said, sighting the campground entrance, and both children sat on their knees to see. Ginny wheeled in, told the kids to sit down, and followed signs until they came to a small lot marked DAY USE PARKING. Cautious, shaking, afraid to believe that they were whole and safe and had arrived somewhere, she pulled the Chevy in, stopped the engine and cut the lights.

Not far away a small building squatted black against the forest backdrop; a single yellow bulb hung from the wall, lighting the concrete step at the door. Ginny felt around on the car's seat until she found her nylon scarf, the scarf Frank had given her the money to buy, saying he was sorry after he'd pulled out her hair. The scarf with the roses that looked almost real, but were meaningless without scent or thorns. The flimsy cloth would offer no protection in the driving rain, but in a small ritual of security Ginny folded it diagonally, covered her head, and tied the scarf's ends in a knot beneath her chin.

"Brenda," she said. "Danny's blue jacket and your car coat are in that bag in front of your seat. Get yours on and help him, okay? Stay inside, I'll be right back." When she opened the door, clean cool air swept in. She stepped out and walked with stiff, quick steps around to the trunk. Searching in its providential light, she found crackers and milk, a snack to help the kids sleep. She got out their long pants, warm shirts, and clean socks. Her own things she left undisturbed. She would find her comfort in keeping her children clean and warm and nourished.

Brenda got out of the car, obedient only to a point as usual. She had her coat on, and Danny had his, and they both wore shoes--Brenda had thought of that on her own. Danny was half asleep, swaying, and he seemed very small, so Ginny lifted him onto her shoulder. By habit or instinct his legs and arms wrapped around her, holding tight.

On their way to the washroom, Ginny and Brenda--linked hand to elbow--bent heads into the wind at an identical angle, hard drops pelting their scalps. But on the way back, Danny walked with Brenda. Free of burdens and walking with her back to the wind, the rain seemed lighter to Ginny. She lingered, letting the kids go ahead, and scanned the dark trying to see what this place was like.

All she could make out was a row of formless shrubs on either side of the parking lot, and in the distance the suggestion of pine and fir and oak. But at the sound of rough breathing and shuffling hooves--close by--Ginny stopped and tilted her head to hear. A deer, she guessed. And when a gust blew up a warm scent, a wild salt smell, Ginny knew she was right. She hoped the animal was warm and dry and safe, out there in the dark.

Back in the car, Ginny draped her scarf over the rearview mirror. She gave Brenda and Danny milk and crackers, and then climbed into the back seat. Settling one child on either side, she weighted them all with blankets. Danny burrowed snug into the shelter of her arm. Brenda sprawled loose; only the top of her head and one slack hand touched her mother's strength. A few breaths later, both of the children slept.

Ginny felt the Chevy around them, then, the way she imagined a sea turtle might feel its shell. They were basking, rocking on lazy waves. Ginny floated toward sleep, but her mind played out three scenes before drifting into dreams.

The first of these images was Brenda's face, perfect and new when Ginny held her for the first time. The clean, indescribably sweet smell of her newborn breath had been a song of angels, and that choir came to Ginny now, undiminished. Then, she saw the three of them on another hospital bed, Brenda snuggled under Ginny's arm and both of them curled around day-old Daniel. A pile of white--crackling pillows, crisp sheets, and woven blankets--floated around them like clouds in the hospital air.

Finally, remembering the sounds hidden in the forest dark, Ginny pictured the deer, a mother too. The doe sheltered a pair of dappled, golden fauns. Now Ginny sank below the surface, wondering about the smells of wet earth, and rooted things, and the scent of a faun's breath. Submerged, she wasn't yet sure that she was dreaming.

Silence woke Ginny in the dark root of dawn. Not wanting to wake the children yet, she freed herself from their warm knot and slipped outside into an absence of rain, wind, and light. The rubber soles of her canvas shoes tapped the pavement. A pebble crunched underfoot. Her small sounds filled the space from earth to sky, and Ginny felt strong.

At the moment when dawn's grey took hold, she stopped silent and the morning settled around her, finding its shape. She felt, then, the weighted balance of everything these mountains held: red ants, sharp-scented pines, deer in the brush, the memory of thunder. And her children, too, sleeping in their chromed shelter.

Some place not far away, Ginny knew, a cougar hoped for an early kill. A coyote. A bear. Frank and his rifle were surely somewhere on this mountain. She hoped he wasn't near, but the burden of that possibility pressed on her shoulders. She still feared him, the man she once loved. She held that fear at arm's length now, having won through the storm. Yet, despite that new strength, she felt a surging need to gather her children and be gone.

The Chevy started easily, the sound of its engine a clean roar that filled the silence. Ginny backed the car out and followed the signs that said EXIT. Coming around the third turn, she braked hard.

Frank's truck was parked at the side of the road, angled half on, half off the pavement. The rifle rack was empty. Her husband was nowhere in sight, but dread began to creep cold over Ginny's limbs. She shook her head and spoke aloud. "No," she said, refusing panic, and anger rushed in to chase the terror down. For the first time ever, she held an image of Frank in her mind and felt nothing but hate.

She sat behind the wheel of three rolling tons--powered, as Frank liked to brag, by "one hundred and forty horses"--and thought of what she could do to hurt him. She pictured herself waiting until he walked onto the road to get into his truck, then running him down. She could see the way his bones might shatter, picture how the chrome bird on the Chevy's hood might pierce the back of his neck.

She considered just smashing into his truck, a symbol, a lesson. She wanted badly to do it, could barely restrain herself, could almost feel her foot stomp the gas. She'd ram the truck, back up, and do it again. She might get away with it, or she might not, but that didn't matter. She'd pay him back.

What pulled her up short was a passing thought: If I do that, I'll be like Frank. She let out a breath that had grown hot waiting for release, knowing that she had made a narrow escape from something far worse than Frank's fists.

She put the Chevy in gear and eased it around the next bend.

Right away she braked again. A deer was crossing the road, an old doe limping on cracked hooves. The animal stopped in front of the car and looked at Ginny. Her muzzle was scarred but her eyes were like Brenda's, unmarred pools of softest dark.

Just inside the trees at the edge of the campground, Ginny heard a rifle shot, but a thrush began to sing before the gun's report even faded. She lowered her window, unable to not listen. From hidden boughs, a multitude of singers added their voices to the psalm until the whole morning rose up alive and bright.

Through Ginny's open window, warm air--a memory of summer--washed over her and coaxed her children from their dreams. Ginny smelled salt on that breeze and marveled, wondering how it carried the scent of life so far from the sea.

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