

The Carpool Lane

Another Monday morning. Just a moment to spare before running the risk of being dangerously close to tardiness. Despite that, she pushes her glasses higher up the ridge of her nose to examine the apartment for the last time. Everything seems in order. A bowl, laden with cat food, under the window; the stove turned off, dishes, still beaded with water, drying on a towel—no time to wipe them. The familiar scent of cinnamon French toast lingers in the kitchen. Grocery list is tacked onto the fridge door with a magnet, and below it, under the last item on the list, scribbled in a large lettering, is her work phone number. Another magnet holds a faded photo of a couple in their early twenties, caught in a moment of laughter, embracing each other and leaning against a tree with her head resting on his shoulder.

“Bye, bye, my three angels. Behave now and take care of Daddy. Urge him to go shopping when he wakes up.”

Pursing her lips, Linda blows a kiss to Huey, Dewy and Louie, who mew and purr, sprawled in a shaft of sunlight that streams through the open window shutters. The light pitches an elongated ladder-like shadow across a stack of magazines, all neatly piled on the coffee table, and then continues all the way to the baseboard at the far corner at which point the linearity breaks and the shadow climbs up the blanched, yellowish wall dotted with framed photographs.

The wood floor creaks and moans under her as she steps into the hallway, shifting her weight from one leg to the other to temporarily relieve the throb in the sole of her right foot. She lays a handbag strap onto her shoulder and cranes her neck forward to

better inspect her reflection in the mirror. She searches for potential wrinkles in her dress, but none are visible. Only her handbag has lost its sheen across the middle front where the black leather grains have been rubbed out into grey and white speckles. She pads through the door into the corridor and gives the handle an extra pull to verify that the door is in fact locked. It would have been an ordinary Monday morning except that today is the first day of having to leave earlier than normal and ride to work with a “carpool-pal”. What an inconvenience!

The draft in the hallway sneaks under her woolen blazer. She shivers, and as she plods down the stairs, her hand skimming the top of the banister for support, her heels echo through the building one step at the time.

The outside air is brisk and heavy with moisture. The passers-by, themselves on their way to work, have already flooded the concrete sidewalk, stepping over the puddles from the last night’s downpour. In one such puddle sparrows fight over the right to peck at a sodden crust of bread. Nearby, debris of twigs, leaves, plastic bags and cigarette butts lie trapped in the curb gutter. “For God’s sake, where is he?” she muses as she sidles against the building nearly touching it. Even in her wildest dreams she didn’t expect him: the guy from the cafeteria, always sitting in a corner with the rest of his countrymen, always with the same faces, clinging together like a gang—even playing cards for crying-out-loud!—yapping and laughing about God knows what—doesn’t sound like any language that she’s ever heard before—blind to the others around them. Seventeen minutes late. He did seem nice enough at their first meeting; he shook her hand and even—imagine that!—bowed slightly. But now, nowhere to be found, this Arnold...or Donald, or some such name.

She gazes through the crowd walking by. Her eyes squint to fend off the glare coming from the sun reflecting off the window shields of the cars that hum monotonously in both directions. Things were just fine and dandy until they relocated the office, and then, just like that, you couldn't find parking again to save your soul. Then they started preaching carpooling and saving the planet.

“Welcome to this spectacular, state of the art edifice,” they said at the grand opening, days after everyone had grumbled about the lack of parking. “Welcome to this paragon of green energy that will generate enough power to supply all our needs here at GP Muscove. That’s one small step for us, but one giant leap for our mother Earth and, we hope, one giant leap for mankind. But it starts here with us folks. We all need to work together as a family; every one of us must contribute toward keeping our planet green. Thus, in response to a cry for help from our Mother Earth, we will be starting a carpooling program with the hope of becoming one global multinational community of carpooling pals. The future begins now, and it begins with us.”

She’s heard it all before. She and Wayne have done their share and then some; let those head honchos clean up the mess they created. If only the bus schedules were more convenient. But even leaving at this hour was a stretch. And then again, the smell of urine at bus stops, bodily odors of all those people wedged against each other were enough to make her head spin just thinking about them. Their silence and their absentminded gazes seemed to penetrate her soul. She never could decide if they were going to mock her or rob her purse.

While debating whether to call a taxicab or to keep on waiting, a car pulls up to the curb, running over a plastic bottle. Linda squeezes through the pedestrians and skirts

around the puddle where sparrows still ruffle each other's feathers. A scrawny and slightly hunched Asian man darts out of the driver's seat and around the hood of the car.

"Terribly sorry, Mrs. Channel, for not being on time, but I was stuck on Maple Street for fifteen minutes; one car sideswiped another. Let me move this out of your way," he singsongs all this in one breath, and from the passenger's seat snatches a box overflowing with faded jeans, t-shirts, jackets, toys and baseball hats and plops it in the back seat. "It's all going to a thrift store, and, more importantly, out of my house." He springs back to hold the door for Linda. She hesitates as if shell shocked by the spurted information that seemed to have come from the depths of his nasal cavity. When she finally bundles herself into the seat, eager to close the door on her own, she yanks at it with more force than needed. The sparrows startle in the puddle.

The heater is blowing at full blast inside the car.

"It's sunny, but nippy out there," he says, rubbing his hands vigorously to warm them. "How's your morning so far?"

"Fine," Linda answers, distracted by the seatbelt that just won't buckle up. She pushes and pushes to force it to fasten, until at last it clicks locked.

"Very good," Harold says. "Here we go."

Linda resettles in the seat and adjusts the handbag in her lap to better feel the grains in its smooth leathery surface. As they ease away from the curb and into the street traffic, the car merges into a stream of vehicles inching forward in unison, only to stop at the next intersection. Linda wipes her glasses that fogged up when she first sat down, and a weather-beaten bumper sticker on the car in front comes into focus. *Still pissed at Yoko*. She nods in acknowledgment and chuckles inwardly. At the green light, the car lurches

forward. They crawl steadily in line with other cars, enter the ramp in one column and then disperse onto the freeway.

The driver clears his throat and says, “We may still make it on time.” It is 7:06. A vanilla scent seems to radiate from an air freshener. It tickles her sinuses, and the tickle persists even after she snorts and wiggles her nose.

“I hope so,” she says. “Never been late for work.”

“I’m rarely ever late, but sometimes life happens. I do apologize for today.”

“It’s quite alright Arnold,” she says sullenly.

“It’s Harold.”

“Oh,” she says and looks at the floor mat smeared with crayons. “You can call me Linda.” Harold stretches his lips into a smile and nods at her. They drive on. Linda sneaks a sideways peak at her carpooling pal, at his hair neatly combed to the side and his smooth high forehead.

The traffic ahead of them halts, creating a domino effect of red break-lights, and Harold, with a glance over his left shoulder, veers into a carpool lane. Their speed is slow but steady as they drive past the adjacent lanes clogged bumper to bumper with cars, each with a solitary driver inside. Through the window freckled with children’s fingerprints, Linda sees them drift by, those weary eyed somnolent people. Some rap their thumbs on the steering wheel; some move their lips like actors in silent films and gaze around sullenly into space, and some bob their heads rhythmically and lip sync to music audible only to them.

“We was almost stuck back there, but we’re cruising now,” he says.

Resolved to correct his grammar, she turns, and, facing him, notices a dry crust of blood on his chiseled chin—a shaving nick—with a small patch of facial hair around it just above the Adam’s apple. She failed to perceive it earlier, even though it stands out from the rest of his closely shaven face and is further accentuated by the whiteness of the stripes in his purple tie which hugs his collar and disappears down into a yellow V-neck pullover. She changes her mind. After all, there was no harm done.

In the mornings, Wayne used to gulp coffee and at the same time run the electric shaver across his cheeks while she maneuvered around his hands, adjusting his tie. But that area around the Adam’s apple was invariably left with tufts of hair that only a razor would smooth out, and there was never time to meddle with it.

“Pugh,” Harold sighs. “The traffic isn’t very neat today.”

“No, it’s not very neat,” she chortles. And just like life, she adds to herself.

With the heater still at full blast she unfastens the top two buttons of her blazer and takes a note pad out of her handbag. “GP Muscove” stands out in bold red letters at the top of the creased page. Underneath it, in smaller font, is the caption: *Optimized Drilling Performance: Answers for Today’s Energy Problems*. She leafs through pages cluttered with crossed out lists until she stops at the half filled page. *Wayne—grocery shopping*. And under it: *7:30 PM Mending Hearts Meeting (V.A. Hospital)*.

“A busy day ahead?” Harold asks.

“ Pardon?”

“Not really. Need to remind my husband about grocery shopping. Otherwise, he may forget to do it.”

“Mom used to say that men are as bad as kids,” he says while glancing at the

rearview mirror. “Always have to be reminded to do something. My father ignored her chidings; in through one ear and out the other. She would throw her hands up annoyed at him, mumbling ‘as bad as kids, as bad as kids’. Dad just winked at me. Later they would kiss and make up, but it was the funniest thing, the way he winked.” He shakes his head, and they both laugh.

“Although he’s somewhat better now, Wayne’s memory has been spotty ever since he returned from Vietnam.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

Linda relaxes her arm lightly onto the armrest. “He doesn’t talk much about it, but the stories I’ve heard were horrible. I know first hand how much Wayne and others have suffered upon the return.”

“I was only a toddler back then, but I do remember the roar of the planes and crowds of refugees, the displaced people as they are called today. It seems so long ago.”

It does seem like an eternity now, and only the memories of it remain; before the draft, before the war and before the rallies, when a burly hiker ran into them in the deserted Redwood National Park, in a fog so thick you could taste the salt in it, where they held each other nestled under blankets on a bed of gnarled woodchips that crumbled under their weight; and how they giggled afterwards, at the man’s failed attempts to cover his embarrassment with a salvo of apologizes for intruding on them, and wished the burly man had never come, so that, as the gossamer fog wafted and finally dissolved into a dew, they would stay there under the blankets, embraced, the two of them alone.

For a while, only the rumble of the rubber tires rolling over the tarmac break the silence in the car.

“Are you married Harold?”

“Happily married for eight years and have three children to prove it,” he says grinning. “What about you Linda? Any kids?”

“No children.”

“No children, no problems. That’s good, more time for the husband.”

“We’ve had some swell times. What do you do for GP?” She asks, turning her head to face him.

“I’m a chemical engineer. Lab experiments, data analyses and all that jazz.”

“So you’re part of the revenue generating team that everyone harps about.”

“Never really thought about it that way... it must be, if the bosses say so.”

They laugh. The smiles linger on their faces, and they chuckle as if they were repeating the same joke over and over.

“Twelve years?” asks Linda.

“Yes, soon after we came to America GP hired me.”

“Twelve years? Your English is very good,” she says and quickly asks, “Is your wife...Asian too?”

“We’re of Chinese descent,” he says, keeping a keen eye on a side mirror, “but born and raised in Cambodia.”

Linda straightens up in the seat and nods her head.

“I was a kid when my parents fled to the Philippines during the Khmer Rouge. We spent ten years there before coming to the States.”

Once an opportune break in traffic appears, Harold steers the car out of the carpool lane to merge onto the off ramp. Linda doesn’t seem to notice anything. Wayne

and his silence, stories of recon missions in to Cambodia and Laos, news clips and movies, images of pulverized flesh and decapitated limbs reel in her mind. Up ahead, casting a shadow over the streets below, a glass structure glints in the sun, its marquee at the top emblazoned in red luminous letters: “GP Muscove”. With her hands on her lap, she embraces the handbag. Its knobby kiss-lock closure jabs into her ribs, her knuckles clenched, turning white.

“It’s not eight yet,” Harold says. “Everything’s in order.”