

WHITE SOMBREROS

“No,” said Marjorie. “Not your car, mine.”

“But they’ve taken your keys,” I said into the phone.

“Hot wire it, then,” she said. “Or steal the keys back from my son. Oh please, Francis, just do it. Just one more outing in my car. That’s all I want.”

I would have told her to call a locksmith, but recently Marjorie hadn’t noticed a neighbor in her retirement village step off the sidewalk into the parking lot and had missed running her over by inches. The management had confiscated her car keys right on the spot. They knew that the next day Marjorie’s son Peter had plucked the spare keys to her car from her hall table while she was in the kitchen brewing tea for him. They weren’t about to let a locksmith anywhere near her.

“Well, are you going to help me out or not?”

“Only if I come with you on your outing.”

There was a long silence.

“That’s final,” I said in my sternest voice. “Either we go together, and if I think you’re not driving safely, I take the wheel - or you don’t go at all.”

“Oh Francis!”

“Don’t Oh Francis me, Marge. Yes, or no?”

Another long silence. Then a petulant sigh, and at last, “Yes – since I don’t have any choice.”

“All right, Marge,” I said. “I’ll see what I can do.”

I should have refused, of course. Marjorie was my former boss, the Headmistress Emerita of Miss Oliver’s School for Girls. She never wanted just one more of anything.

Peter Boyd, Marjorie’s son, was about fifty years old. I drove to his house to talk him into giving me the keys. I wasn’t sure he would believe I was forceful enough to persuade his mother to give up the wheel to me if she started to drive erratically, but I did think he’d understand why she wanted the outing to be in *her* car. She loved it. Who wouldn’t? A 1949 four-door Buick convertible, black and shiny. Its hood ornament, a woman leaning forward, long hair and cloak streaming in the wind, imparted the feel of a clipper ship. It was June. The weather was gorgeous. We’d sail out of the retirement village with the top down, past the

SLOW! ELDERLY sign, onto Fieldington's lively streets and then out into the countryside and the open road. We'd find a nice inn, or roadside bistro, and have a sumptuous lunch.

Peter Boyd was riding a shiny red tractor mower in the middle of the green downhill slant of his huge front lawn when I arrived. He looked contented until he noticed me crossing the lawn. He switched his engine off as I drew near. "Yes?" he said, frowning in the sudden silence.

"I was just out for a drive," I lied. "When I realized I was near your house, I thought I'd drop in."

Way up above me on the tractor seat, his expression didn't brighten. I had forgotten how big he was. Blond like his mother once had been, with the same blue eyes. He wore cut-off dungaree shorts and a worn dress shirt with the sleeves rolled up on his thick arms. "Well, come in, then," he said, grudgingly, sliding out from under the steering wheel, and we crossed the lawn and entered the kitchen of his lovely old farmhouse. He said, "My wife's out shopping. You want some water?" He took a pitcher of cold water from the refrigerator, poured a glass and handed it to me. I took a sip. He watched me drink.

"She sent you, didn't she?"

"No, I came on my own."

He shook his head.

"All right, she sent me. But you shouldn't have stolen her keys."

"Really? You think she would have given them to me if I'd asked?" He paused for a few seconds, studying me. It was a strangely intimate moment during which it dawned on me that the only way he'd ever been able to see me was as his mother's henchman. "She's got a plan and she's gonna carry it out," he said. "Her plan for driving is to not to stop just because everybody knows she should. So what if she can't see where she's going any better than she can remember where she's been? So what if she kills somebody?"

"She won't," I said. "I'll make sure--."

"It was always the same," he said, cutting me off. "Back straight, eyes straight ahead, right down the middle of the road. Yes, her half was in the middle. I'd sit in the back seat with my fingers crossed. Dad up front in the shotgun seat. He didn't even dare ask if he could drive. Didn't dare ask anything else either. That's why he left, you know. He figured since his wife was married to a school, he might as well get married to someone else."

I should have paid more attention to Peter's anger and sadness. At last, with the keys to her car, he'd finally had some control of his mother, rather than the other way around, and he wasn't about to let go of it. But I was too bent on helping Marjorie to have compassion for him so I lied again. "I'm going to do the driving," I said, looking straight into his eyes. "She just wants to get out in the country with the top down. So, tell you what: I'll take her on this drive. Then I'll bring the car here and you can lock it in your barn."

"No. I'll tell *you* what: My wife will drive me there this weekend. Then *I'll* drive that antique of hers here and lock it in the barn. When she can't look out her window and see it anymore, she'll forget it exists. How's that for a plan?" He paused, pretending to wait for my answer. Then he said, "You finished your water?" and I still didn't answer. So he plucked the glass out of my hand, dumped what was left of the water on a potted ficus tree and headed for the door. "You should practice lying," he said over his shoulder, and then he left me, standing alone in his kitchen.

By the time I got home, I realized my son Sidney would know how to hotwire a car. He was just as forgetful as I was and could never remember where he left his car keys either, but unlike me, he was a good mechanic. Maybe he'd had to hotwire his own car once in a while. Marjorie loved Sidney. And he loved her right back. He would do anything for her. When he was a teenager and things got difficult between my wife, Peggy and me, Sidney would leave us and go to Marjorie's house. Sometimes he'd spend the night. I don't know what she said to him to soothe his adolescent heart, but whatever it was Peggy and I were grateful. And when Peggy died, Marjorie was so heartbroken she carried a massive chunk of Sidney's and my grief on her own shoulders. Maybe that was why I was willing to go so far as to actually hotwire a car for her.

That night, after dark, Sidney met me where Marjorie's car was parked, and got the job done in a flash. I stood by the car, standing guard. "I feel like I'm in the movies," I whispered.

"That's where I learned to do this." Sid's long legs stuck out the driver's side door as he lay on his back, his head and arms twisted to get under the steering column. He named a movie I had never heard of. "I saw how to do it and then I borrowed your car. I was only fourteen. Piled it full of kids and drove around one night while you and mother were chaperoning a dance." He sat up. "Finished," he

said. “All done. That was the most fun I ever had driving a car. Didn’t you suspect?”

“No,” I lied. “Never.”

Sid grinned and raised his eyebrows. Then he put on his serious face and showed me where the two wires were that I would connect to ignite the engine – and how to put it all back together when our outing was finished.

It was late by then. I asked him over to my place for a beer and we sat across from each other in the living room of my little condo, while he told me funny stories about all the other times he’d “borrowed” the car. After a while, I pretended to snore. Sid laughed and went home and I went to bed.

“Siddy did this?” Marjorie said, the next morning, glancing down at the butchered ignition.

“Last night,” I said. She watched me connect the two wires for her and then she pressed her foot on the starter – still on the floor in cars of that vintage. The engine sprung to life.

Soon we were outside of Fieldington, driving west on Route 44 with the top down under a blue sky while the sweet springtime air caressed our faces. Marjorie still wore her hair in a bun at the back of her neck, though now it was entirely white. A few strands came undone in the wind. She was dressed in a white blouse, pearl necklace, grey skirt and stockings, as if she were taking a wealthy potential donor out to lunch, instead of just me. She and Peggy and I had travelled this way, lots of times to hike in the Berkshires. But now Marjorie limped, leaned on a cane, having refused to get a hip replacement. “I don’t want anything in me that isn’t me,” she had announced. And that was that.

“We headed any place in particular?” I asked. (You got further with Marjorie with indirection.)

“Yes, a place I’ve only been to once. I’ve always wanted to return.”

“Well, now you can.”

“Yes. You’ll love it too. It’s the kind of place that once you’ve been there, you can’t ever forget.”

We didn’t talk for a while after that. I wanted Marjorie to focus on her driving. She was doing quite well – maybe going a hair too fast – and she gripped the wheel with both hands as if it were a live thing she needed to subdue. But she was safely on the right side of the road, and she slowed for curves and refrained

from tailgating. I almost relaxed. What little guilt I had for enabling this escapade began to melt.

She was the first to break our silence. “How did he learn?”

“How did who learn what?”

She glanced at me as if I were losing my mind. “How did Sidy learn to make a car go without any keys?”

“Oh that! He learned it from a movie.”

“Well, we’ll have to watch that movie.”

“Why?”

She took a hand off the wheel and patted my knee. “Dear Fran! Still so naïve. So they can’t trace this episode back to Sidy. If they ask you, tell them I did it. And if they ask you how I learned, tell them I learned it from the movie.”

“But Sidney told me how to put the ignition back just like it was before. Nobody’s going to know.”

“We’ll do nothing of the kind. I’m not going to sneak.”

“Marge! We are sneaking.”

“Only because we have to,” she said. “But I want Peter to know in the end he’s not my boss. He can’t tell me what I can do and what I can’t.”

I thought about that for a moment. Then I said. “All right, Marge, have it your way.”

“When he comes to get the car tomorrow, he’s going to get a big surprise,” Marjorie said.

“He is certainly is!” I said, imagining Peter’s face when he would see the ignition. Since then I’ve thought of her remark at least a thousand times.

A moment later, Marjorie pulled off the road, through an open gate and parked in an opening in some woods at the foot of a little mountain. “Here we are,” she said. The place smelled of new leaves, of grass, damp earth, the bark of trees, and sunshine. A brook ran through the clearing. Someone had built a little wooden bridge to get across. Marjorie pointed to a trail that led into woods on the other side of the bridge. “It goes up the mountain,” she said. She turned, reached into the back of the car for her cane, and opened the door.

“Marge, how far are you going to go?” I asked, but she was already out of the car, limping toward the bridge.

I got out of the car and started to follow. But when she reached the bridge, she turned, facing back to me. I stopped. She put her hand up. "I'll only be gone a minute."

I watched her limp over the bridge. When she got to where the trail began on the other side, she stopped next to a huge boulder, and put her hand on its top, the way she used to greet students, putting her hand on a shoulder, letting it linger there. Then she walked where the trail went around a bend, out of sight.

I stood on the bridge in the hot dappled June sunshine, listening to the brook and wondering what it was she was so eager to commune with all by herself. Maybe I knew deep down. Maybe I didn't want to know: I'd have to prevent what she thought she had earned the right to do. She never let anyone else make decisions for her. So why let Nature, or Fate – or even God?

Only a few minutes later, she reappeared out of the woods. I was relieved. But I wasn't sure why. I hadn't really imagined that she wouldn't come back.

"It's time for lunch," she said. "Let's go to The Sheffield Inn. We'll drink to Peggy."

I was suddenly very hungry. The three of us had gone to the Inn often after our excursions – to an ill-lit bar in the back that was always full of the same group of old men who never took off their hats where we drank rum toddies with lunch after cross country skiing, and Tom Collins in the summer after hikes. We both were sure we remembered how to get there.

How wrong we were! We drove around the tiny town for at least a half an hour, getting more and more confused. "Oh Fran! I'm so scared of losing my mind," Marjorie said.

I was dumbfounded. I'd never heard her acknowledge a weakness. "It's been a long time," I said, trying to reassure her.

And then I saw it, just up ahead on the narrow street. "There it is," I said, pointing at the Sheffield Inn sign above the door of a faded yellow building. It had grown even shabbier than I remembered it.

"Where?" Marjorie was driving exactly in the middle of the narrow street, going too fast.

"Right there!" I pointed again. "See? You remembered."

"Oh there it is!" She stared at the sign, her eyes away from the road. The car moved left, almost to the other side of the street. "Why are places so easy to remember where they are *after* you find them?" she asked.

“Marge!” It was too late. I heard the awful sound of metal on metal as our left fender sideswiped a grey Mercedes parked on the other side of the street.

We got out of the car and surveyed the damage. The Mercedes bore a deep gouge all along its side. “Oh, dear, what shall we do?” Marjorie said.

I was more shocked by the question than by the accident. Marjorie helpless? “Leave a note,” I said.

“A note?”

“Yes. Leave your name, address, phone number and the owner will call you and your insurance will take over.”

“Of course.” Marjorie started to fish in her purse for pen and paper.

“Look, Marge, while you write the note, I’ll park your car for you, all right?” I expected her to say, *No, I’ll park it myself*, but she nodded her head, still fishing distractedly in her purse.

I parked the car. It seemed huge to me, like a tank. It wore a twin of the gouge it had delivered to the Mercedes. I could hear Peter’s *I told you so*, as if he were standing right there on the sidewalk, towering above me and shaking his head.

When I returned from parking her car, Marjorie was standing by the Mercedes. I was shocked again by how distraught she looked.

“Fran?”

“Yes, Marge?”

“I can’t remember my phone number.”

“Oh you’re just distraught, that’s all. Everybody is after a fender bender.”

She waved her hand dismissively. The familiar imperiousness raised my spirits for an instant. “What’s my number?” she demanded.

I told her, speaking very quietly as if I were telling a secret. She nodded, wrote it down, put the note under the windshield wiper. “There.” she said.

“You’ll feel better with a lunch,” I said.

In the dim light of the inside, the bar seemed even more run down and tired, the paint on the walls a greasy brown, the floor streaked by a careless mopping. I didn’t mention this to Marjorie – though it had to be just as obvious to her as to me. The same group of men was there. They didn’t look any older – as if they had stopped right where they had been when Peggy and Marjorie and I had last been there and were waiting for something to begin again. The heavy, dank smell of

stale beer pervaded the place. I didn't want us to talk anymore about forgetting telephone numbers or geriatric drivers and their fender benders, so I asked her to tell me what was so special, other than its beauty, about the place where she'd asked me not to follow her across the brook.

It was like waving a wand. Her sadness disappeared. A waiter came to take our order. She waved him away and began to tell me the story of driving along that road, looking for a trail where she could ski on her new cross-country skis. "It was just after my husband left me," she said. "I came around a corner and there was that little wooden bridge, covered with snow. I stopped the car, put on my skis and crossed the bridge. The water was glistening black against the snow. And you should have seen those big rocks, with snow on top, sticking up out of the brook! They looked like the heads of men buried to their shoulders wearing white sombreros in the sun."

"White sombreros? They're rocks, Marge." With what had just happened that proved her son so right, I wasn't in the mood for poetry.

She looked hurt. "That's exactly what they looked like to me."

"I'm sorry, Marge I'm feeling crabby all of a sudden thinking about that Mercedes."

"Forget it. It's just a car."

"Yeah and the insurance will take care of it," I said. "Go on, tell me the rest."

"I went into the woods," she said. "It was dark. The trail went on and on. I was dying to see the sky. And then all of a sudden I was in a flat meadow and the sky was big. I skied in and out of a grove of cedar trees. A grouse flew up! I came to where the trail left the meadow and started to climb the side of the mountain and I knew I should stop. The afternoon was half over. It would be dark soon. But I skied and skied and skied, up and up and up. "And then," she said, smiling now at the surprise of it all, the discovery, "I skied some more. It was as if I were sucking in all the oxygen in the world. I was drunk on air. And still I knew I should stop. Turn an ankle here, twist a knee, no one to help me, I'd die in the snow when the night came, go to sleep in the dark. I was very scared, realizing how foolish I had been. I started to turn, to go back, telling myself, *go carefully*. But the sky was so blue, the snow so white. Oh how can I tell you what it was like?"

She went on then, telling me how she turned again and continued on up. Up and up, until there was no further upwards she could go. There were cliffs above

her. It was dark now, the sun gone, the cliffs loomed indistinct above her. “They probably saved my life,” she said. Then she turned and went down. “I knew I should go slowly, but I flew. I laughed and screamed all the way down. I crossed the flat meadow and skied through the dark woods. The only sound was my skis on the snow and my breathing, and when I crossed the little wooden bridge, and was back at the road, the moon came out. *It’s over*, I thought. *I’ll never have that again. Never!* It was the first time I really understood that everything ends. I sat down on a stump and took off my skis, and when I stood back up, my legs were trembling so hard it took me forever to get to my car, dragging my skis behind me.”

She was silent then and so was I. I saw her again in my head, flying down the mountain and I could hear her skis and see the moon come out over the flat meadow.

“Well,” she said, at last. Let’s order lunch.” She gestured to the waiter.

“And you never went back until today?” I said.

“Nope. Never.” Her tone had turned surprisingly matter of fact.

The lunch was terrible: luke warm spaghetti, the sauce obviously right out of the can. We left most of it on our plates and got out of there as quickly as we could. Leaving the Inn, Marjorie seemed to lean less heavily on her cane.

Outside, across the street, a teen age boy in a sleeveless T shirt and backwards baseball hat was standing beside the gouged Mercedes. He was running his hand along the scar. We crossed to him. “Do you know who owns that car, young man?” Marjorie said.

“My father!” The boy was still running his hand over the ruined paint. “Man, is he going to be pissed when he comes out and finds this. Who d’ya think did it?”

“I did.” Marjorie stood up straight, the headmistress again.

“*You* did!”

“Yes *I* did. That’s my note under the windshield. He’ll be completely recompensed.”

The kid looked at her disdainfully. “Jeez, Lady! You get your license in a grab bag?”

“Where she got her license is none of your business, “I said. “Just go tell your father. Her telephone number is written in very clear handwriting.” I put my hand on Marjorie’s elbow and turned to leave. But she put her other hand on mine and removed it firmly. Then she patted the boy on his shoulder.

“I understand how you feel,” she said “It’s a lovely car.” Her voice was gentle.

The boy shrugged.

“I love my car too. She gestured toward her big Buick.

The boy turned and looked, surprise blossoming on his face. “That’s *yours?*”

Marjorie nodded. “Yes. Isn’t it lovely?” She put her hand on my elbow and led me away. A few steps later, I looked back. The boy was watching us walk away. I think he was trying to decide whether he was still angry or not. Marjorie was hardly limping at all.

Which is why I let her drive in spite of the gouged Mercedes. She seemed her old self again. Besides nobody had been hurt. It was just a fender bender. Who hasn’t had one of those?

We were both silent, thinking our thoughts. She drove at a moderate speed, stayed away from the middle of the road, and catching up to a slow truck near the end of the journey, stayed safely behind it the rest of the way.

Nevertheless, I was relieved when we pulled into the driveway of the retirement village. Marjorie would never drive again. Peter would come tomorrow and take the car away. As Marjorie had said, he’d have a big surprise when he saw the butchered ignition. I hugged her goodbye and drove home in my car, pleased with myself: Marjorie had asked me for help and I had provided it and everything had turned all right. Besides, I’d been rewarded with her telling me about one of the most vivid moments in her supremely vivid life, when she was as alive as anyone can be. She didn’t have to tell me she’d never told anyone else – except maybe Sidney. I just knew it.

I went to bed that night, still feeling happy. But I woke up a few hours later hearing Marjorie’s son Peter saying, *She’s got a plan and she’s gonna carry it out.* I lay frozen for a moment while the day I’d just spent with Marjorie re-wound in my head. Now I knew why Marjorie had wanted to go on the outing alone. I jumped out of bed, threw on some clothes and drove fast to the retirement village, hoping to find her car was where we had left it. But I knew it wouldn’t be.

The empty space in the parking area was huge.

It took me over an hour, driving fast through the bright moonlight to get to the open field beside the brook and see her car parked where I knew it would be. I didn’t get out of the car to follow her. She’d be far gone by now, my headmistress,

my boss, my dearest friend, walking as fast as she could with the help of her cane up the trail. The moonlight through which she journeyed was piercingly bright.

In the morning, her son would come to the retirement village and find the empty parking space. And when the police came to me, I would tell them where to look. In the broad daylight, in the dazzle of the sun, they would find the butchered ignition hanging from its wires.

Sometimes I regret helping her with her plan. I should have known there was something more than a drive in the country that she wanted. Other times I'm almost proud.

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