

Offramps

Cyn was, as always, grateful when the plane landed and taxied to the gate with no excitement. Even though today she had half-hoped the plane might get re-routed. Procrastination came easy to her, but there was no delaying this visit with her son. Cyn thought about how much she had enjoyed her last visit with Quinn and Julia; they were having difficulties then, but there had still been hope.

Now divorce was imminent. Quin was adamant that she still come stay with them; he was fairly sure Julia was going to be moving out immediately anyway. Cyn liked Julia, always had, but was relieved that there would be minimum time together. She was anxious enough about the hour-long ride from the airport to the house. Quin and Julia both contributed to the destruction of their marriage but Cyn's loyalty would always be with her son.

Cyn took the absence of a line at the ladies' room as a good omen. Stopping in front of the mirror, she noticed the expected darkness under her eyes. Otherwise she was pleased with the reflection. Her weight was more or less under control. Her hair had lost all its drab brownness in the last two years – now it was all silvery grey. She looked her age, which was fine with her. It had taken many years to progress to the point that she didn't hate everything about the way she looked. It took a few more years after that to find a few things she liked, like her eyes. Somewhere in her late forties she found herself looking in the mirror and not hearing her mom's voice, listing all her flaws. Although to be fair to her mom, the poor lady was only

judging by the same standards as the world at large. She really did want Cyn to be happy and confident. Which apparently required the approval of complete strangers.

Cyn sighed and picked up her well-worn bag, the soft leather straps landing in their comfortable positions. She also had a couple suitcases in checked baggage, newer suitcases with less miles and fewer memories. Cyn always wanted to travel light – but she never quite made it.

Julia was waiting by baggage claim. Cyn noticed Julia's blonde hair, quite a few shades lighter than last Thanksgiving. Her snug pencil skirt and silky blouse were familiar. Her face betrayed nothing of the pain Cyn knew she was feeling. They chatted idly while walking to the parking garage. They had both recently seen the same movie; they talked about Brad Pitt all the way to the truck. Cyn was pleasantly surprised that Julia was driving Quin's old truck. They tossed the bags in the bed, no arranging needed. The sun was hot on her shoulders, a sensation she always enjoyed after coming out of an over-airconditioned building. The hot wind on her face was less enjoyable. Less enjoyable, yet more welcome than the icy wet winds she had left back in Rhode Island. It was a bit of a stretch getting up into the cab, but Cyn preferred that to the knee-cracking bend it took to get down into Julia's little sports car.

She had to dig around the back of the bench seat to find the seatbelt. She also had to loosen the belt to secure it across her lap. She remembered when the truck was hers. Thom and Quin would always have to cinch up the belt after she had been the last one in the seat. That's one thing she liked about modern shoulder belts – they left no record of your size. Not that she worried about her size anymore. Her doctor said she was overweight, and she was sure that was correct, but she was exactly the average weight for women her age. Also average height. Somehow that knowledge, and a hundred other things she had learned over the years, gave her

the confidence to be herself without apology. Not for the first time Cyn wished she could go back in time and smack her younger self, tell her to get a grip.

Julia missed a gear going through the parking exit but otherwise drove the old pickup with confidence and skill. Julia seemed to do everything with skill and confidence. And efficiency. Cyn loved watching her make salad – no wasted movements, perfectly and evenly sized chopped vegetables, and no mess afterwards. Cyn had no idea if Julia was exponentially more confident than Cyn was at her age, or just better at hiding her insecurities.

The truck was loud, but not so loud as to discourage talk. As expected, Julia wanted to talk about the planned divorce.

“Cyn, I want you to know I tried. I really truly tried.”

“Oh hun,” Cyn answered, “I have no doubt about that.”

“Quin tried too. I know he did. But somehow we just can’t make it work. Did you know we went to counseling? The marriage counselor said that any marriage can be saved as long as there isn’t contempt. He said that once one person felt contempt rather than anger, that it was basically impossible to fix. I dunno about that. I have sadness, anger, confusion, but no contempt. Maybe resentment. I asked Quin and he said he has never felt contempt for me. I believe him, but I don’t think he is good at recognizing feelings? I mean, why does he storm out drunk instead of talking?”

“Shit, Cyn, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to bring up the drinking. It isn’t often. And it isn’t the only problem – it’s just the thing that confuses me.

“Ah hell, it all confuses me.

“I wanted to keep trying. I can’t imagine not having Quin in my life. I sometimes wish we would have had kids.

“No, not really. Neither of us would be good parents right now with all that anger. But maybe we wouldn’t piss each off if we were a real family. God, it’s such a mess.

“I should probably move back to Colorado. My job here is killing me – which is just another thing we fought about. And you know I’ve always hated the heat. To be honest I wouldn’t mind being near my mom.”

Cyn wondered what it would be like wanting your mom at such a difficult time. She had avoided her own mom as much as possible during her own divorce several years ago. She loved her mom, and liked her. But Cyn’s mom wanted to fix things, wanted to help. Which meant that every time Cyn talked to her mom, she received countless suggestions of how to make the marriage work. Losing weight was mentioned once or twice. As were a slew of books that had numbers in the titles; *Seven Steps to Wedded Harmony*, *Five Love Languages*, *Eight Management Principles that can be Applied to Marriage*, *Three Easy Rules to Save your Marriage*, etc. Her mom also advised against trying New Age things like *Wife Swapping* or *Christian Marriage Retreats* – things Cyn had never once thought about.

Aside of her own maternal relationship, Cyn was happy that Julia had the support she needed. She also understood the appeal of a fresh start in a new town.

Julia continued; speaking slow at first, then running all her words together, and then slowing down again. Her inability to find a consistent tempo was the only indication of the stress she must be feeling.

“It would be easier not needing to worry about accidentally running into him. Except for one thing. You remember Lauren, the girl he was dating when I met him. He has not mentioned her or said her name in more than five years. Don’t you think that’s odd?”

Cyn was startled to realize Julia was waiting for an answer to what seemed a rhetorical question. The obvious answer would be that of course Quin never mentioned Lauren – Julia always went into a jealous snit when someone mentioned Lauren, or if she came across an old picture of Quin with Lauren. Cyn didn't say any of that. She had briefly considered saying it. Gently, of course. Yet even delivered gently, it seemed unnecessarily mean. She went with her favorite non-answer.

“I'm not sure I follow you?”

“If Quin could completely forget Lauren then he will probably forget me!”

Cyn again struggled with an obvious but possibly unkind answer. Would Julia be relieved, or hurt and angry, to know that Quin hadn't forgotten Lauren. The last time Quin and Cyn talked on the phone he had talked at length about how similar Julia and Lauren were. He wondered if he would always choose women who were an unhealthy match. This time she answered Julia more forcibly.

“Oh, for goodness sake, of course he will never forget you. Do you imagine you will forget him?”

“That's different. Men and women are different – you're always saying that. He was talking a while ago about his first job, and he couldn't remember his boss's name! I mean, I know he won't forget me tomorrow or even in the next year or so. But someday he will be talking to his new wife and will mention his first marriage and not be able to remember my name. Or what I look like.”

Before Cyn could formulate an answer, Julia continued.

“But it’s okay. Our marriage counselor talked a lot about breaking insurmountable problems down into small units. If you can break something into small enough pieces, then each piece can be fixed or eliminated. So I think I’ve got it figured out.

“No one ever forgets their mom. Especially if they are close, like you and Quin are. So if every time Quin thinks of you he also thinks of me then I won’t be forgotten. If we are melded together in his mind then every Mother’s Day, and your birthday, and Thanksgiving, and all the holidays, and every time he sees a Burt Reynolds movie, and when he eats tamales, and – and - and I don’t know what all, he will remember me.”

Cyn felt like she had just been punched in the gut. Julia couldn’t be insinuating something that crazy. But if not, then what was she saying?

“Julia, I don’t think I understand what are you saying? Julia?”

“It’s a good plan, Cyn. It really is. Ever since we decided to divorce, I have been so heartbroken. And I know you were heartbroken when you left Thom, so it’s a good thing for both of us.”

“Julia, Julia listen to me. Yes, I was heartbroken. But I’m good now. I love my life. You will be fine too. Quin will never forget you, no matter what. But in a few years you probably wouldn’t care if he did. Listen to me! You will both be memories, and after enough time you will be a pleasant memory!”

Julia said nothing. She continued to move smoothly through traffic, her manner giving no indication if she heard Cyn.

“Julia, please! Julia, please pull over, I don’t feel well”

“Cyn, it’s all right. Don’t be mad, I really don’t have a choice.”

When Cyn realized that Julia wasn't listening and wasn't going to stop she took a deep breath and grabbed the door handle. She wasn't sure she could actually jump out of a moving car; she couldn't even figure out which way she would have to move her body or how she would propel herself. She had a brief hope that once the door was open Julia would snap out of it and pull over. The door handle flopped loosely back and forth, without engaging the latch. Cyn shook it and tugged on it but it wasn't doing anything. She looked at Julia in disbelief.

“What the hell, Julia! This is crazy. Pull the truck over right now!”

“You don't think I did that do you? That door handle has been broken for over a year, Quin keeps saying he will fix it, but he never does. It's provenance. I had planned to use my car but Quin said I should drive the truck since it has more room and is easier for you to get in and out of. See what I mean? He's always thinking of you. I realized this was even better because now when he thinks about his truck, he will have to think about me!”

“No Julia, it isn't *providence* or fate or anything like that! You're tired and sad and really shouldn't make any life decisions right now. What about your mother? You don't want to do this to her! Julia, please stop the truck. It will be okay, I promise.”

“Quin does that too. He corrects me by using the right word and just stressing it a little bit. He thinks he is being nice but all he is doing is reminding me how much smarter he is than me. In less than a mile no one will ever need to correct me again.”

Cyn looked up. When she first realized Julia planned to kill them both, she assumed Julia would run into an overpass embankment or something. Something Cyn might live through if she were lucky. She had the random, unwelcome thought that they might share an ambulance. Cyn's body trembled and her hands shook. She discovered her knees could shake even when sitting down. She was dimly aware that her teeth were chattering as Julia moved into the lane to

take the fly-over offramp. Cyn had always hated these tall curving structures. Was Julia going to try to go over the side? Their speed was increasing as the offramp appeared to grow taller.

Cyn tried to say something, tried to find the right words to convince Julia this was insanity. But her mouth was dry, her jaw was trembling spasmodically, and her brain was a mess of fear, anger, and static. Instead of talking she reached over and grabbed a handful of Julia's hair, yanking hard. Julia was pulled toward Cyn, the steering wheel following obediently. Cyn felt the truck make contact with a car in the next lane, hard enough to cause her to lose her grip.

Julia straightened the wheel with one hand while grabbing her designer water-bottle with the other. She swung her right arm hard, the stainless-steel bottle making an odd crunching sound *and* a hollow bell sound when it struck Cyn's forehead. Cyn was dazed. She reached ineffectually for Julia, but the blow to her forehead was bleeding hard. Cyn couldn't see well through the blood and the hair. And what little she could see seemed to be at weird angles. She did feel the acceleration, and she heard the shrieking of the poor overworked V8.

She looked at the windshield and saw the cloudless sky as she felt the impact of the truck hitting the wall. The truck went up the wall at an angle, corkscrewing into the air. Cyn cried out in absolute terror, echoing Julia. After an interminable time of upward flight, they felt the hand of gravity pulling them back to earth. In the 2.96 seconds before impact and *almost* immediate death, Cyn had the thought that usually these crazy bitches killed their husbands - and she was glad that Quin was safe.

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Quin consulted his list. He knew it by heart. Yet he kept updating and consulting. He started the notebook after the call from the police. First item being the phone number and address of the morgue. He had seen enough television to have a rough idea how loved ones went about identifying bodies. But after seeing their shattered bodies and filling out all the forms, he had no idea how to be - how to exist. How to continue living. He had cried in his car in the parking lot. He had pulled over halfway home to cry. And to scream.

His call to Julia's mom had been heart wrenching. Tina was understandably heartbroken, heartsick, and desperate to disbelieve. When they finally hung up he had considered calling his dad, but decided to wait until Tina called back with her flight info.

Based on witness accounts, the cops seemed to think Julia deliberately drove off the ramp. He thought that was ridiculous. Until he arrived home and found the note from Julia.

After reading the note (the first time) he had punched a hole in the wall by their bed. He may have damaged his hand, but couldn't work up much curiosity, let alone concern. Zero cathartic satisfaction there. He threw Julia's laptop through the closed window, but the breaking glass didn't soothe him. In a moment of sanity, he dropped his gun into the hot tub. Eventually he heard back from Tina, then he dialed his dad's number.

"You hit pay-dirt with K-Dirt."

Quin couldn't help but smile. His dad was, if not dependable, at least dependably goofy.

"Hey Dad, this is Quin. Are you driving?"

"What do you mean? You mean am I in the car? Heh, heh. I don't know if I should answer that, heh."

Quin took a deep breath and briefly considered just hanging up. How much his dad had been drinking was difficult to judge. It was just barely five PM on a work day so he shouldn't be too soused.

“Dad listen, this is important. Dad, I'm sorry but Mom died today in an accident. Dad?”

“Yeah that can't be right. She's visiting whas-her-name, her friend in Connecticut. She flew there and I haven't heard of any plane wrecks. Man, imagine how pissed Cyn would be if she died in a plane crash, heh heh.”

Quin felt his jaw contracting and his teeth biting down hard. He should have called his dad as soon as he got the call from the police chaplain. He told himself he didn't want to call until he had more information. Yet he had called Julia's mom immediately and was able to answer all her questions. Fortunately she hadn't asked why or how.

“Dad, shut up a moment! Listen to me. Mom is dead. She died today, here in Phoenix, in a car accident. She was with Julia. They, they, Dad - they are both dead. Mom and Julia.”

There was silence for several moments before Thom finally answered,

“I don't know what to say. I always told Cyn she drove too fast. I can't believe this. You said she was with Julia? Your ex-wife Julia? Man, that sucks.”

“Julia was still my wife, Dad. We hadn't even separated yet. And Julia was driving, not Mom.”

“Oh. Well that's something. They were in that little electric car, weren't they? Those things are dangerous.”

Quin counted to ten. Then to twenty. Then thirty, before he gave up. “Dad, I still have a shit ton of things to do yet. I'll talk to you in the morning.”

“Okay, Quin. You keep on. I love you. It'll all be fine.”

Quin gently placed his phone on the table. He wanted to throw it against the wall. He would have if he believed it would actually explode into a million little shards. He wondered if Thom was as bad as he seemed, or if Quin's own grief and anger were coloring his perceptions.

The next morning Quin went through the motions. He called a few more people on his list, enlisting them to call others. He called his dad but got voicemail. When he had finished everything that could be done, he sat at the kitchen table, staring out the window at nothing. He eventually got up and got out the good scotch.

He was throwing up before he had even finished swallowing that first desperate gulp. After cleaning up the mess he decided he should eat. Some dim corner of his mind knew that he was only eating in order to be able to drink. Fortunately, or unfortunately, he could not even hold a bit of bread and honey down.

He didn't know if Tina would be staying here or at a hotel. Both options seemed ludicrous somehow. He also imagined his dad would come, and would stay at the house, but it was hard to tell. Quin knew he should do the things a person does before hosting overnight guests. He opened the notebook to make a list. He scrawled "Fuck Fuck Fuck" across the page, breaking the pencil tip on the last K before closing the notebook.

He needed to pull himself together, if only because that's what people do. He showered. He got dressed. He made the appointment with the funeral home. He swept up the broken window glass and dumped it in the recycle bin. Even as the glass started to pour out of the dust pan he remembered that broken glass pieces weren't supposed to go in recycling. One of the many repeating fights he had with Julia was about his disregard for the recycling rules. The newly-familiar sensation of his internal organs clenching and twisting made him wrap his arms

across his middle. Unaware that he was holding his breath and rocking, he waited for the pain to subside.

He returned to the necessary tasks, each one simple yet requiring motivation he couldn't sustain. Simply putting clothes in the washing machine and choosing the proper cycle took a ridiculous amount of time and all his concentration.

It was a relief when he heard his dad hollering from the front door. They hugged for a long time. Thom, as usual, smelled like beer. He offered Quin a beer; he'd brought a 12-pack and was going to refrigerate it.

Quin instead grabbed a vitamin water. As his dad opened another beer, Quin had a fleeting image of his mom always unconsciously tightening up when she heard that sound. His stomach lurched. He ran out the kitchen door and was sick again. He wondered disinterestedly if this was going to be the rest of his life. When his stomach stopped roiling, he straightened up. The sun was brutal, or maybe just today was brutal. Back in the kitchen he sat down, unconsciously gripping the edge of the table as if he might fall.

Quin would eventually have to admit to his dad, and Julia's mom, that the crash was a deliberate act. He had no idea why he didn't want to tell them what the police had told him. Or about Julia's note.

Quin realized his dad had been talking while he was lost in thought. He tried to pick up what he had missed.

"...so, I said screw it. It's not every day your ex-wife dies with your daughter-in-law. I told him I would be back when I was back. I'm here as long as you need me. I figure I can stay in the spare room. Good thing you have two rooms, it might be awkward for me and Julia's

mom to share a room. Heh, heh. I can stay as long as you need me. I probably need to get more clothes at some point, I was kinda messed up this morning. The news hit me hard, real hard.

“I had to stop to eat on the way here. Shouldn’t drive on an empty stomach. I went to that pub on 87 for a late breakfast. The cook knows me, knows what I order. I was talking to Jeri – she used to be a waitress there but now she just hangs out sometimes. She is five foot nothing and her boyfriend is the big biker type. Six foot three inches and must weigh at least 350. Maybe more, heh heh. When I told Jeri what happened, she bought me a drink. Then the cook comped my lunch. That reminds me, I have most of the wings in my car if you want any. Then this old guy I sometimes play darts with came in and Jeri told him what happened and so he bought me a beer. He said he knew what I was going through. He has quite a few ex-wives and the oldest one died a few years back. More folks came in - they get a pretty heavy lunch crowd. I know a lot of these folks and most of them wanted to buy me a beer so I really couldn’t leave. Heh, heh. Really, it made me think. It’s nice to have people you can count on. People that are always there for you. The cook knows what I order, ten wings – extra hot. I used to order sandwiches sometimes but then I decided I didn’t need all the bread and carbs. Wings are whatchacallit, paleo or kiko? They are almost like a super food. Heh, heh. The cook knows that’s what I always order so as soon as I walk in, he starts cooking them. Today he didn’t charge me because of what I’m going through with your mom dying and all. There must have been half a dozen people that bought me a beer today. It’s almost like family, heh heh. People you can count on, that are there for you.”

Buying a grieving alcoholic more alcohol before a long drive struck Quin as something other than supportive. Thom continued to talk about the bar. Quin silently apologized to his mom. Shortly before she had left Thom, Quin had tried to convince her she was over-reacting.

That you shouldn't divorce someone just because you didn't like the way they laughed. Now in the span of an hour he understood. He had never noticed the laugh before and now he never wanted to hear it again. He excused himself to finish prepping the house before getting Julia's mom from the airport.

He checked the guest room. Julia had it all set up for *his* mom, and now Julia's mom would be staying there. He managed to keep his tears where they belonged, but couldn't slow his fast, shallow breaths. He removed the flowers and candles from the room. They were too cheery and he could not remember what exactly she was allergic to. The bed was made up with bright flowered sheets and comforter, maybe too cheery and inviting, but better than the spare room. That room had a desk covered with boxes and a futon covered with laundry. He wondered if he should do anything more than moving the laundry to make the spare room comfortable for his dad. Maybe a pillow and blanket? He opened the closet and there was bedding – stacked neatly on a shelf labeled 'Futon bedding' in Julia's curly writing. He looked at the shelf labels and the box labels. He knew he would be finding bits of her for many years, and that it would hurt each time.

His dad came in, tossing his dufflebag on the chair. He hugged Quin, started to say something, stopped, and hugged Quin harder. Quin hugged him back, grateful for the unexpected comfort.

Quin gathered his car keys, phone, and water. And a plastic bag, just in case. And a box of Kleenex for Tina. He felt like he was forgetting something. Or maybe he just didn't want to go.

Thom's leftovers were still on the counter. Quin opened the box to find nine chicken wings and two sad pieces of celery. He put them in the fridge. He tried to refrain from counting

the remaining beers. The five remaining beers from the 12-pack. His dad had consumed however many beers (Quin thought 13) and exactly one chicken wing to counter the alcohol. Quin wasn't sure where his sudden concern came from. He spent years trying to convince his mom that Thom's drinking wasn't a big deal. Thom wasn't a mean drunk, didn't have a string of DUIs, and held down a job with the county. Quin had noticed that his mom seemed happier since the divorce. Poor most of the time, but happy. Quin rarely saw Thom, and never worried about him like he did his mom. So why now?

Quin paused at the front door. The sky was cloudless and sun-bleached, almost white. Thom again asked Quin if he wanted him to go with. Quin shook his head and hugged his dad. As Quin lowered himself into Julia's car, Thom repeated the offer.

“Serioshly, I don't mind. I'm here as long as you need me. It's important to have people around you. I was at the pub today and Jeri, she's this waitress, she's a little bitty thing. Probably five foot, if that. She has a boyfriend, he's a big boy – probly six and a half feet and must weigh 350. Heh, heh. Easy. So Jeri bought me a beer because she was concerned about me. Then other folks that I know came in. They all wanted to buy me a beer when they heard. They love me, Quin. After this is all over I'll take you to the pub and introduce you to everyone. You'll like them. And some of the gals will like you. Heh heh.

“You're picking up Julia's mom right? Yeah, her and your mom always got along. That's important. Expeshally now. It's all about family, like I was telling you.

“Y'know, it's interesting. This accident happened when Julia was picking up your mom, right? And now you are picking up Julia's mom from the same airport. I hope she isn't superstitious. Heh, heh. Do you think she will be worried?”

Quin's body went rigid. With slow deliberation he put the car in gear before answering his dad.

“She just lost her only remaining child, I would imagine she is in shock and somewhat indifferent to what the future holds.”

“Well yeah, but you should still drive careful. You sure wouldn't want a repeat performance. Heh, heh.”

“Dad, I just lost both my wife and my mother. I am still in shock and incredibly indifferent to what the future holds.”

Thom watched the taillights slowly disappear down the road, happy that his son was resilient - like him.