# A Woman's Face in a Green Truck

When fire sirens go off in the Southern Hemisphere, the dogs don't do anything, but all the cats start meowing like crazy. When kids in the suburbs of Buenos Aires are riding their bikes around in a circle, the same force that makes all toilets flush in the same direction causes them to ride clockwise. And when people anywhere in South America laugh, they don't say "Ha ha ha" but "Hralah, hralah, hralah."

These are the things I am pretending to have learned in Argentina at the Jorge Louis Borges quincerocentennial conference I just came back from, commemorating the one hundred fifteenth anniversary of his birth.

I'm telling this to my sister's friends Kyle and Laura, on this ozone-sharp afternoon, not because I want them to believe me, but because these stories, which Helen knows so well from our high school days, are a way to gently needle her for making fun of me about my water bottle crisis.

With lunch over, the four of us have drifted into Kyle and Laura's kitchen. Their power is still out from the storm. We're standing around in the brightness of their large windows, in the trailing end of Hurricane Miranda, drinking Tanqueray and tonic from tumblers made of spun aluminum.

What I'm most glad about is that Helen and I can still tease each other, under the circumstances. She's friends with Kyle and Laura from a grief-counseling group

they were in two years ago, for parents who have lost a child to suicide. Given the way the three of them seem to be able to relax together, it seems to have helped, if that's the right word. The only area in which it didn't help was that the group wasn't able to prevent Helen and her husband from moving out of their house two months after it happened. My friend Dianne, who now works in the psychology department at the University of Minnesota, told me that when a couple moves out of their house in the wake of losing a child, they have a much higher likelihood of getting divorced.

I'm sure that the storm is one of the reasons why we're in such a good mood, with its negative ions and low barometric pressure. When you go outside it doesn't feel all that windy, but the remaining storm still has enough force behind it that when you turn your head into the slight drizzle, you can feel the drops stinging your face like grains of sand.

This weekend's visit, stopping over at Helen's condo in Fall River on my way home from the Buenos Aires conference, was the first time I'd seen her since Joseph's funeral. We were sort of on tiptoe with each other for the first day, but at least there were BBC programs on TV, so we didn't have to talk too much, which for us was okay—though it's the same unfortunate phenomenon that I've seen in more than one faculty gathering, when everybody's talking and having a good time, and then somebody turns on a BBC program, and what was once a party is transformed into a mostly silent session of well-educated entertainment.

I was supposed to fly back to Texas today, but Logan Airport is still closed, so Helen is driving me to the Providence train station, by way of the long scenic route, and then I'll take the train to New York, and fly out tomorrow. We drove down through

Newport, and out to Lands End, where we sat in the car and watched the surf slamming up against the rocks, then we continued over the reopened Narragansett Bay bridges, and now up to Wickford, to Kyle and Laura's house for lunch.

In the presence of parents who have gone through something I couldn't imagine going through, a water bottle crisis is a stupid thing to even be thinking about. I know that, but I'm still angry. I had flown with that bottle, a sturdy plastic container originally for orange juice, for many tens of thousands of miles. In Panama City, where I had my connection, the gate staff of Copa Airlines had been instructed to put an extra level of screening on all flights to the US, but they didn't know what they were supposed to be screening for, since we were already inside security. All they could think of was to confiscate everybody's water bottle, full or empty.

I guess I harped on the water bottle topic a little too much over lunch, but there has been something about this day, the magnetized tingle of the storm's atmosphere, that seems to have made it easier to talk about all sorts of things.

"Get a life," Helen said to me. Actually, a life where you get to fly to South America on your employer's budget is nothing to complain about. The dean of Arts and Sciences is new, and he's a biologist, so maybe he's not familiar with literary conferences, and so doesn't know how easy it is to chair a panel discussion when you don't have to give a paper yourself.

The fact that we are drinking Tanqueray and tonic from spun aluminum tumblers is one of the things that has made today perfect. I'm not a gin drinker, but I can hear, and taste, even in the name "Tanqueray," the sharpness of the wind, the click

of half-melted ice cubes against the hardness of aluminum, and I can taste a slight acidic tingle of the depressurized weather system still gusting above our heads.

In Joan Didion's great essay "Los Angeles Notebook," she describes the opposite extreme: how, when the hot air of the Santa Ana wind comes down from the Mojave Desert, across Barstow and Victorville, and rushes down El Cajon Pass, the negative ions get stripped from the $O_2$ molecules, so that when the wind reaches sea level and spreads out, it fills the whole Los Angeles Basin with its tense and prickly air.

Even the four colors on the outside of our tumblers are perfect: bright enamel yellow for Helen, cranberry for Kyle, cobalt blue for Laura, and for me the best of all, the iridescent green of a deer fly's abdomen.

What this shade of green most reminds me of is something so far removed from this moment that it was perfect in its own diametrically opposite way. This was back in Lubbock, just after my friend Dianne had accepted a new job at the University of Minnesota, much better than what she had at Texas Tech, and we knew without talking about it that we didn't love each other enough for her not to take it.

It seemed that the only thing we could do to stop being sad about Dianne's leaving was for us to go shopping for a new car, even though there was nothing wrong with the one I had. I was all for getting another Honda, but she said that life is too short to drive a Japanese car, and I couldn't afford a BMW, so we found ourselves at Gene Messer Ford, on a day so unforgivably hot and dry, and full of positive ions slamming in from New Mexico, that I just now caught myself wanting to say that it was the hottest day of the year, but really every hot day in that town feels like the hottest day of the

year. It was a day so far removed from today that I think I'm one of only a handful of people who have experienced both ionic extremes.

The kitchen conversation has now worked its way around to the handmade Argentinian shirt I was bragging about to Kyle and Laura. Helen says the colors are all wrong for my face.

"Can't you see?" she says. "There's too much orange. You can only wear cool colors." She's right, of course. She's been decorating hotels and bank lobbies for years, plus she's the best-dressed person I know. The problem is that I can't see it. When I look in the mirror, all I see is my own big face, and to me it's the same face, even if I'm wearing purple with pink polka dots.

"I don't need any colors. I'm a colorful guy already."

"But it makes you look ten years older."

While the appraiser was inspecting my trade-in (Good news! the word would later come back), Dianne and I waited around in the cool of the showroom, looking at the vehicles on display. She got up in the cab of a small pickup, a metallic green Ford Ranger 4X4 with big knobby tires, the cab raised high above the chassis, and jacked forward a few degrees. She sat there grinning in the showroom's light, her compact volleyball player's body, and her olive-toned complexion, framed by the iridescence of the truck's paint job.

As I said, and as I've been puzzled about with my own shirts, I had never understood what it means when people talk about colors going together, or what they mean when they say that one color makes another color "pop."

But there she was. Never has anybody looked so perfect in a vehicle. I hadn't even noticed before how green her eyes were. The shades of her face, as she sat behind the wheel, with the driver's window open, her smirk of amusement at how simultaneously silly and beautiful this day was—all these things were part of the same composition: her face, her green eyes, the paint job's sparkly green flecking under the hard clear coat, the cheerful blunt grille of the cab, raised at its racy angle—all I can say is that the colors *popped*, so clearly that even I could see it, and I can still see it, even if I can't see anything else.

Another perfect thing about that day was that our ages were just the right number of years apart that some people thought I was her husband and some people thought I was her father. We didn't have to wait around for the salesman; he knew that we looked like a real couple looking at real cars, rather than just time-wasting lookie-loos.

While Dianne grinned in the Ranger, an older man walked past, and said to her, pointing to me, "Maybe your daddy's going to buy you that truck." If could have afforded it I would have done it on the spot. I could have been her daddy and her husband on the same day.

We drove around for the rest of the afternoon in my new Wild Strawberry Focus hatchback, which they had talked me into leasing instead of buying, breathing in the sweet leathery smell of the interior, in the chilly whisper of the air conditioner, sheltered inside the car's dark-smoked cop-killer windows, everything around us all of a piece: the sky pressing down over the baking traffic on Clovis Road, the look of the land when you get a few miles out of town—flat, but not flat enough to be dramatic,

rising slightly at the intersection of each mile-spaced section road, the high ground often occupied either by a metal-sided nondenominational church, or by a cluster of six-bedroom town houses, built very close together, as if for protection against Indians. Coming back into town, we could feel how ridiculous everything outside our little capsule was: the percussive growl of exhaust pipes, the caustic air, the bumper-sticker Baptists, all the people who listen to Christian rock stations and who have never had occasion, within the boundaries of their Christ-centered world, to even learn that Buddy Holly was born here; of course it's a horrible town, a city whose NPR station is located so far down at the bottom of the FM spectrum that if an older car with non-solid-state ignition pulls up next to you, you can hear the ticking of static pulses from the rotor hitting the contact points inside the distributor.

We sat there, cool in the traffic. Everything was funny, even if we couldn't think of any more jokes about dumb Texans.

We made each other laugh, is the short of it. Garrison Keillor said in one of his monologues that you should marry the person who makes you laugh. Once when we were fooling around in my apartment with no clothes on, I pressed the TV remote against my throat and spoke in the buzzing monotone of a prosthetic larynx. She had to run to the bathroom with pee squirting out between her legs. She could do an imitation of the blonde in blonde jokes, tossing her hair back and forth, her mouth frozen open in a spaced-out smile. There is no girl in the world who is actually like that, but if there were, Dianne had her movements down perfectly. The fact that we didn't love each other might have been a problem, but people have worked around worse issues than that.

The problem with things being perfect is that they're perfect to no purpose: Dianne smirking in the driver's seat, Tanqueray and tonic in a hurricane, the perfect, platonic, dumb blonde, tossing her hair back and forth, happy that she finished a jigsaw puzzle in two weeks whose box said "3 TO 5 YEARS."

Helen and I have to go pretty soon, to get to the Amtrak station without worrying about time.

"Before you go," Kyle says. "I want you to see the view from behind the house."

He refills everybody's drink, Helen taking just tonic, for the drive. We go out the back door, just as we hear the buzzing shudder of the power coming back on. From an open spot at the back of their yard, we can look down across miles of woods and houses. The rain is down to a few stinging pinpoints. Everything is in black and white, and motionless, except for the restless branches around us. We can see the sort of furrow that the Post Road makes in the trees, even though we can't see the actual road. Beyond, we can look out over Narragansett Bay, its gray water featureless and flat, and see in the distance the Jamestown Bridge that we just came over.

Every time I see a view like this, I get a twinge of wishing I could stay here in the East, and never have to go back to Texas again. But then it wears off. Coming home, it's relaxing to know where everything is in my kitchen. My cat is waiting for me to come spring him out of jail. It's true that Lubbock is a spiritual sewer, but then I get up in the morning, I get dressed, I have exactly what I want for breakfast, and drive to a job I don't hate, through a spiritual sewer that that's actually been pretty good to me, in a Wild Strawberry Focus whose warranty covers even oil changes, while Pandora spins tunes I would have chosen myself if I'd thought of them; to an office full of people I get

along with, most of whom aren't even all that PC. If it were any of my business to find them falling short in any respect, it would be that, academically speaking, they don't put their money where their mouth is. The department's Hemingway specialist has never been to a bullfight. The woman whose most popular course is "Representations of Class in Contemporary Culture" has never been on a Greyhound bus. The guy in the office next to me gave a paper at MLA in Chicago, called "Interrogating Liminal Space in the Fictions of Rachel Phillips Gallivander," but I know that when he took the Blue Line back to O'Hare, and passed through the series of hallways and automatic doors that connect the train platform to the airline departures area, it did not occur to him that he was passing through some of the most liminal space in the world.

Besides, it's too easy to laugh at Lubbock, just the name of it: a big fat guy ready to pull out a gun and cut your throat. Actually, even the people who want to kill you are mostly nice. Maybe they don't even want to kill you. The checkers at United Supermarkets always ask me if I found everything I was looking for. The only problem is that if I ever said no, they wouldn't know what to do.

We stand there. I'm ready to get going up to Providence, so that I can catch the right train and get to New York in time to have a nice dinner somewhere. It's weird that we're standing so still, and nobody is saying anything, not even how dramatic the view is, as if we're waiting for somebody to bring up a subject that they're not quite ready to talk about.

All I can think to do, to break the silence, so we can get out of here, is to raise my aluminum cup and say, "A toast: to good friends, beautiful views, and bad weather."

Awkwardly we move closer together, until we are close enough to clink our tumblers against each of the others.

Then Helen says, “To Joseph.” Nothing moves. We stand still with our drinks halfway raised.

“To Stephanie,” Laura says, and I can hear her voice crack. They fall into a three-way hug.

The End