

## En route

The vinyl burned the backs of Arlie's legs. She cranked down her window. Vern ooh'ed and ee'ed as he worked himself in behind the wheel: he felt it, too.

"Seatbelt, Vern." With grand gestures she fastened her own, and from the clicks and groans beside her, knew that Vern was trying to secure his, one of those many little rituals, like holding hands, or running the water cold, that her husband – her physical husband at least - could still carry out about as well as ever. When he finally grew quiet, she felt for the upper left button on her watch: "Two-Thirteen-P-M".

"Plenty of time," she said, as if in reply, and then, "Roll down your window, Vern. Get us some air in here." She opened the purse on her lap and felt for the keys. Once she had isolated the car key - bigger than either the apartment or locker one, toothed on both sides – she held it up and jangled the bunch in Vern's direction.

"Got it? That's it. Put it in your keyhole there and turn. Like we do." She pointed to the left, the general direction of the steering column, and heard the metallic tap and scratch of the key finding its way into – she hoped - the ignition switch.

"You turning? You've got to turn it, Vern, like this," and she made a little pinching twist with the fingers of her right hand.

Nothing happened. She felt a bead of sweat tickle between her breasts. She reached across the console until she brushed Vern's arm, then followed it out to his hand: he was holding

the key all right, but up by the dashboard, near the radio. TV repairman so many years, he'd never forget about knobs and dials.

“Vern!” she shouted, slapping his hand. “We’re starting the car, for God’s sake! The key! Then do the foot. You know!”

Clinks followed, and in another moment the old Buick’s engine revved three times like a hotrod at a light, then settled into a muttering idle. Throatier than last week, that was for sure: next thing would be a new muffler.

This driving routine of Vern and Arlie’s was one they’d been following for almost two years now, ever since Arlie’s macular had become so bad – “lights are just about out now” – that she couldn’t get her license renewed. And though Vern’s memory meant he couldn’t find his way around town any more, his vision seemed fine, and his old driving reflexes had stayed in his limbs just as surely as Arlie’s old itineraries had stayed in her imagination. Between the two of them, they could get just about anyplace they had to.

Today, anyplace they had to was Vern’s neurologist, then the Shop ’n’ Save for a rotisserie chicken.

“Any cars coming on your side?” Arlie asked. “You looking to see? Pay attention now.”

They’d stopped soon after Vern had pulled out of the parking place. From that timing, and the sticky whine of tires on pavement, Arlie knew they’d reached the exit to the elderly-housing lot.

“You looking to see?” she repeated, louder.

“Yes.”

“You tell me, now, when there’s a good long space.” And a few seconds later, “How about now, Vern? Look out your window. Still cars?”

“No cars.”

“Pull out! Quick now, Vern. To the right.” She swept her hand widely, knuckling glass. Tires squealed, her neck snapped.

No horns, no crash, just a cool cheek from moving air. She opened her eyes on lesser darkness, and drew her legs back in.

It had been a month since their last visit to Dr. Drummond, the one who had started Vern on the experimental drug for his memory. In fact, Arlie was quick to tell anyone who would listen, Vern was enrolled in a nationwide study, run by specialists down in Boston, which meant free medicine, free brain scans and blood tests, free appointments. They’d both had to sign consents – which she couldn’t read anymore than he could grasp - indicating they knew the drug should do some good, though might also do some harm; and for four months now, at seven-thirty sharp every morning, Arlie had been making him swallow his two big capsules with a full glass of water. So far, she hadn’t seen much change.

“Have we gotten to the light yet, Vern?”

“No.”

“When we do, go right again.” As she pointed, she felt the car slowing, then smoothly stopping. It was cooler here, and dimmer: the shadow of the Stanley Building, it must be. Yes, the dry cleaner smell, from next door.

“Light red?”

“Yes. Red.”

“When it’s green, go right.” She pointed again. “Wait for green now, the one on the bottom. You watching?”

This wasn't the shortest way to Dr. Drummond's office, Arlie knew, but this time of day it would mean the fewest cars, the fewest delivery vans, the least chance of an accident. There would be stop signs – three of them all told - but Vern was good with stop signs. Better, really, than she'd ever been in her own days behind the wheel.

“At the stop sign after next we're going to go left.” Shortly, they stopped, but soon after starting up again, slowed.

“What is it, Vern?” Arlie asked. “Something in the road? Something in the way?” He shouldn't be braking just yet: this should be the long block. She swung her head back and forth, hoping for a shard of peripheral vision. Nothing, and with a jerk that set her seatbelt, the car stopped dead.

“Vern, what are you doing?” They couldn't be much farther than the Pizza Hut. “Answer me!”

“My son.”

“Your what was that, Vern?” Malcolm had died thirty-three years ago, triggering a tripwire on night patrol, the official letter had said. Forgetting all about that had been the one saving grace of Vern's dementia. Would that blindness had done the same for her.

“Vern...” But the car door behind her squeaked open. Rustling sounds, a grunt. Slam.

“Drive, gramps! Got a gun under this camo.”

Arlie shrank, her heart wild under the chest strap. Perfume in the air. She reached for Vern's arm.

“You deaf? I said, Drive!”

“What... what is this?” Arlie asked straight ahead. “Who...?”

“C'mon! Get a move on!”

Arlie leaned toward her husband. "Any cars coming, Vern?"

"No cars. Coming."

"Go ahead, then, down the road. To the stop sign. Like we do." As the breeze from her window resumed, something knocked Arlie's left arm, tore her purse from her lap.

"What's your bank?" The raspy voice was a young man's. Young smoker's.

"Bank of America," Arlie said.

"Where we're goin' then!"

In another minute, the car came to a stop. Must be the intersection now. That program once about holdups – what never to do. Police stations. She tried to line up streets. On account of the crowds at the Farmer's Market, there should be a policeman at Monument Square. But how.... Was this really Tuesday? Were they really...?

"I said, Drive! You stupid or something?"

"Ray." It was a girl's voice directly behind Arlie, syrupy, verging on whiney: the voice of the perfume.

"Shut up!"

"Keep straight, Vern. If nothing's coming. Going to be all right. Everything's going to be all right."

"What's with the geezer?"

"He needs help with directions. Sometimes. He... he doesn't remember so well."

"You drive, then. Pull over!"

"I can't."

"What? Drive?"

"See."

“Oh, shit! Shit, shit, shit!”

“Go left here, Vern.” And then, emboldened by the strange new advantage her blindness seemed to be giving her, Arlie finally turned her head toward the voices. “May I ask what this...? Why we’re going...?”

“May I ask, Shut the fuck up, lady!”

\$2016 in the savings account. Arlie knew the amount, including this month’s interest, to the dollar. Both of their Social Security direct deposits not due until Wednesday. The CDs... they wouldn’t have to know about that part. But it wasn’t the money that was the worry: they had her MasterCard now, address, both their Medicare numbers. Identity things. And what were they going to do with Vern and her after the bank? Maybe Vern was right - they really would be meeting Malcolm today.

She could slowly work her hand out the window and signal whatever it is you signal for help. Lower it and scratch “SOS” in the grime on the outside of her door. Maybe face out the window when they stopped, and mime “Help!” over and over with contorted lips, hoping someone happened to be standing there on the corner to notice, someone big and bold and yet caring enough to take seriously an old woman mouthing like a fish in a bowl. Or how about just fling open the door next time they stopped, and run, ducking gunfire. Run, leaving Vern to his fate the way he had long since left her.

At the faint dingy sound of the Preble Street intersection, she whispered to Vern to go right. And then, louder, over her shoulder, “You don’t have to worry about us, you know.”

“Who’s worryin’?” It was Ray. “I’m not worryin’.”

“Because, like I said, I don’t see, to give a description or anything; and my husband here, he doesn’t remember, so.”

There was to be no reply. Arlie could tell from the zipping, change hitting the floor mat, he was still working on her purse.

“My husband must have thought you were our son,” she began again, keen to keep some kind of contact, but not show she knew a name. “He thought he was stopping for our son.”

“The camo? He been over there in....”

“I said, Shut up!” Ray interrupted. There was a sharp report, a whimpered “Ow!”

“No need of that, now,” Arlie said. “No rough stuff in my car. No, he was....”

“You too, lady. Both of you, Shut! Up!”

But she didn't. “What are we passing?”

No, Arlie wasn't about to shut up, even to save her life. Without seeing, talking was the only connection she had. She didn't even know where they were any more. Her bare right arm was hot from the sun, so they were going south, all right, but she'd lost count of the streets.

“Looks like a post office,” Ray said. “Big gray place, on the right. That a post office?”  
Then louder: “I said, Is that a fucking post office?”

“Shut up, you told me.” The girl's voice was muffled - bent forward, she must be, face in her hands.

“Jesus! You're the one lives here. You want me to....”

“Post office sounds right,” Arlie interrupted. “We're going good. Keep straight on, Vern, few more blocks.” She could hear the girl sniffing behind her and went on. “No, not Afghanistan, our son. Way before that. Viet Nam. Before you two were born, I bet.” They were still: not interested. Didn't even know what Viet Nam was, probably. But Arlie was determined now to keep them talking, even if it was about this. “Killed in Viet Nam, actually. 1972. That's

when the war was good as over. His name's there on the wall, with all the others. You can go see it. Walk right up to it and touch it and spell him out with your finger."

Once more the car stopped, as if blocked by that long, tapering expanse of black marble Arlie could see clear as day.

"So how could I have been him?" Ray asked. "If he's dead. Answer me that, huh?"

"He don't remember stuff, Ray," the girl said. "Don't you remember?"

"Membered somethin'."

"You don't get it do you, Ray?" And then she added, more resigned than vindicated, "He don't get it."

Arlie braced for another blow; it didn't come. She wiped the sting from her eyes. Ray must not be from around here, she thought: he didn't know the bank or even the main post office; didn't get how they were just tacking back and forth through mid town, going nowhere fast. The girl, though, she sounded local, though for some reason wasn't questioning anything. Soon, however, long before they'd ever run out of gas, she would have to get them to the bank. And then? To get them in close, Ray would make Vern parallel-park, something he hadn't been able to do for years. Flustered, Ray would pull her out of the car, steer her in through the big glass doors by the elbow, wait behind her by the velvet rope with his hidden gun pointed at her back and keep it aimed as she felt her way forward to ask the teller for all their savings. "In twenties, please," she could say, to make the count take longer, giving her time to grimace and dart her useless eyes and trace H-E-L-P on the counter in front of her in sweat. And all the while, back in the car, the girl would be holding Vern hostage. Not that that would be anything new for Vern.

"What do you look like?" Arlie asked. "Wondering if you look anything like...." Then, ruing the question: "Can you see Monument Square yet?"



“Coming up,” the girl said, more brightly. “The bank out Congress we going to?”

“Yes,” Arlie said. “That’s the one. Out Congress.”

She was running out of time now, as well as conversation, but the girl saved her: “Ray’s like, really thin? Like your husband. ’Cause he don’t eat right, chips and stuff, and he chain smokes, all the time. Crazy hair.....”

“Shut up, Lee!”

But she didn’t, anymore than Arlie had. “Your son look like that? Probably not the hair, though, in the real army, huh?”

There was honking behind them, and in the distance Arlie could hear guitar music, one of the buskers who played folk songs at the market.

“No,” Arlie said over the noise. “Doesn’t sound much like our Malcolm. He was a big boy. Big shoulders. From my side. Maybe it was more the outfit. We have this last picture Vern loves. It’s all framed on the bureau, him in camouflage, and every night Vern....”

“Make him drive, lady!” Ray shouted.

“He can’t, Ray, that truck.”

“Pull around it!”

“Vern, honey, can you see around the truck? Just drive around it if you can. Nice and slow. You see around?”

Stopping and starting, the car lurched ahead, then, with one defiant surge, the engine went silent. Vern was stomping on the pedal like a fire. More horns blared, overwhelming the music.

“God damn it!” Ray shouted. “Start it up!”

Softly, Arlie instructed: "Turn the key back, Vern. Then the other way. Do your foot."

But though the engine turned over, it didn't catch.

"Fuckin' flooded it!" Ray snarled. "Get outta here!"

"Ray, not that way!" the girl shouted. "Cop!"

"Shit yes. Your side!"

"Police?" A pause and Arlie threw her arm back between the seats, grabbing cloth, flesh.

"No! Stay here.... If they find Vern.... Vern! In the back!" She released his seatbelt, grabbed his shirt and wrestled him toward her. "Switch with him, Ray. Get up here!"

"You gonna....?"

"He's by the truck," Lee called, as Arlie felt Vern, whimpering and writhing, being dragged over the console and into the back seat. Ray's elbows, his buckle, gouged her left arm on their way forward.

"Officer," Ray said a moment later, his voice in the front bland and innocent as Vern's.

"Can't park here, you know. Loading zone."

"We're not parking, sir." Ray cleared his throat. "Stalled out on us is all."

The officer didn't say anything.

"So, OK I start it up?" Now Ray was almost shouting: the officer must have moved away.

But in another minute there was the voice of authority again. "Need to see your license and registration, please."

"Is there a problem, officer?" Arlie asked, leaning toward the voice.

"I just need to see the papers, ma'am. Routine."

"This here's my nephew," she went on. "Grand nephew, that is. He's driving us to the doctor - in our car - for my husband in the back there. He's the patient. I hope this won't make

him late.” She opened the glove compartment and groped inside until she came to an envelope. She waved it to her left.

“License, too,” the policeman said.

Arlie felt Ray shifting in his seat. “It’s for medical research,” she explained, smiling up toward the voice. “The appointment, I mean. My husband’s part of a nationwide study and....”

“Back with you shortly.”

“You all right, Vern?” Arlie called over her shoulder.

“Nephew?” Ray asked. But Arlie wasn’t listening to him.

“He’s fine,” Lee said. “Aren’t you fine, Vernie, all cozy back here with me.”

“Just be a few minutes, Vern. Have to wait for the officer. You need the lavatory?”

There was a slap close by. “Hey, what the?” The raspy Ray again.

“Just wants a feel of your camo, Ray. Christ sake.”

Arlie straightened herself. She took a deep breath: the heat there in the sun, the stench of exhaust, were making it hard to breathe. Or was this plight within a plight what made it hard to breathe? The chance and danger it brimmed with?

Hardly: it was none of that. Nothing as simple or logical or even heroic as that. What was making it hard for her to breathe was anger, the return yet again of the awful, inchoate anger at Vern for losing his mind; for abdicating everything, including Malcom, to her; for putting the two of them, over and over again, in jeopardy.

She grabbed at her wrist: “Two-Forty-Seven-P-M.”

“Who’s that?” Lee asked.

“So.” It was the officer, back at the driver’s side. “Seat belt violation, and inspection’s overdue. You’ve got two weeks. See if you can’t start her up now.”

Arlie reached across Ray's chest, leaning until her finger tips touched his door.

"Officer?" She waited, sensing against her arm the tension of young muscles, the held breath, the rapid taps of another's heart. "I just have to tell you..." and she waited again as long as she dared, "... that we thank you very much."

She sat back. Ray's buckle snapped. After two tries, the engine started. Air moved; the guitar twangs grew louder, then blurred back into the general hubbub of a downtown afternoon.

"Where you wantin' to go now, Ray?" Lee called. "You any idea at all where you want to go?"

Ray didn't answer. The car picked up speed, but two turns later began to slow, and with a creak of the emergency brake stopped abruptly. The driver's side door opened and closed, then the rear door on the other side. All was quiet except for the rumble of the engine and a slow pounding – the foundry on Grant.

"Vern? Honey? You there?"

Arlie reached back between the seats, groping until she came to a bony knee. She patted it, then turned and stuck her head out her window.

"You take care now!" she called into the dazzling darkness. "You two take care of yourselves."