Show Me the Way

Go along, get along, Paul believed, but part of him wanted to argue with the route his daughter LuAnn chose. If she drove through Republic and turned north on 174, she'd cut off four miles to Mt. Vernon and they could pull up the lane to the home place. The house was long gone but the grove of hard maples, a rarity in the Ozarks, remained. They'd have turned scarlet by now, blending with the yellow sycamores and the reddish-brown oaks. Maybe they could sit a moment, watching the leaves swirl and fall. But it took great effort for Paul to speak and he gave up without trying. As LuAnn passed the exit for 174 and pulled onto the Interstate, Paul dozed.

He woke to LuAnn's violent wrestling with the wheelchair though nothing obstructed it. Using both hands, Paul opened the door, shifted his right leg and then his left, but had to rely on LuAnn to pull him out. He turned a little in the chill air, proudly standing without help, and plopped down in the chair all on his own.

LuAnn wheeled him up the ramp and through the electric doors. He was keenly interested in the walking trail that circled the building; perhaps some kind volunteer would take him for a spin through those pines and bald cypresses. He wanted to be done with LuAnn and her damned lists. No doubt he came first and soon she could cross him off.

She parked him in the foyer and entered an office to dispense with paperwork. Paul looked down a hall so long it must cross into Dade County and bore into the far wards where they kept the men without memories. Dear God, they wouldn't put him there.

He turned his head and was startled by sight of an old lover, whose name he couldn't recall. He'd searched for her after they parted. He licked his dry lips. In the city, he thought, maybe thirty years ago.

LuAnn returned with a smile. The hall slanted slightly downward for twenty feet and LuAnn pushed the chair, as if testing if he still had strength to press the brake. He did but coasted ten feet or so, before coming to a gentle stop. "A little thrill," LuAnn called out, grinning.

The chair had turned halfway round and again he saw his nameless lover. Her face was pale, plain, nothing memorable about it, as if she were merely an appliance in the Spartan office. No pictures on the walls, no clue at all about her identity except her name-tag, too far away to read.

Briefly, she stood beside LuAnn, and stared down at him with institutional empathy. The woman whispered something to LuAnn, patted her shoulder, and turned away with a mechanical laugh. Not her: just the passing of years told the tale. She couldn't be the same woman. He was crazy to think so.

LuAnn wheeled him onward, past the cafeteria with the flat sound of silverware scraping against Melamine plates—Ruth the Waitress, his eighth lover, had nothing but Melamine in her cupboards. She ought to know.

Accompanying the Melamine sounds, Karen Carpenter sang "Top of the World." That had been the nameless woman's favorite song and Paul tilted his head to indicate he wanted to stop, but LuAnn rolled on. Paul remembered sitting in his Dodge pickup on a rainy day, listening to the song. It was a sweet, upbeat tune but Karen Carpenter's voice was so sad Paul was brought to tears. He'd had nine lovers. Which so exalted him he climbed to the top of the world?

They didn't wear white anymore, opting for those blue or faded red scrubs, so you couldn't tell the nurses from their assistants. But a squat woman in red quickly took charge, and with the help of a husky young fellow, in blue, hoisted him into the bed. They propped him up to watch *The Sons of Katie Elder*. Mild-mannered Paul disliked John Wayne's belligerent screen presence, though *Katie Elder* was tolerable. Better than *Chisum* or *McLintock.* People indifferent to Westerns knew only about John Wayne. All old men liked John Wayne, didn't they?

He drifted away, though his lips moved occasionally, reciting dialogue from the movie he'd seen a dozen times. He closed his eyes and sought out a bright, pleasant dream full of graceful women who smiled and laughed, though not truly at Paul because he was more of a camera than a person.

Errol, his son-in-law, arrived, and his restive two-year-old daughter jumped up on the bed with all the entitlement of Paul's old dog, Ralph. Paul missed Ralph, but of course they wouldn't allow him in the home. No, Ralph was dead. He just crawled up on the couch one day, shuddered, and died.

The girl landed on his chest and Paul's lips emitted a crackly laugh, but a fellow in a checkered shirt appeared and nodded to Errol, who gathered up his daughter. Paul had never met him but that checkered shirt nailed the man. In these latter days, doctors tried to look like people.

Vietnamese: Nguyen Thị Minh. "Mr. Roman," he said. "Thank you for your service."

Paul nodded. His second and third lovers were Vietnamese prostitutes, one a boom-boom girl out among the rubber trees, the other an upstairs resident of a former convent where pictures of Jesus and Mary looked down. Both were country girls and whatever names they gave, Suzy or Nancy, were phony. Neither liked to be kissed but at least Paul learned something about sex. He wasn't sure he'd done it right on his last night with Candy, his high school sweetheart.

The doctor looked up from Paul's chart. "You like John Wayne, huh?"

In his mind, Paul shook his head, but it hardly moved. He tried to say no with his eyes.

LuAnn stepped forward. "He *loves* John Wayne. Don't you, Daddy?"

The doctor nodded. "All alone in *High Noon,* standing up against the bad guys."

So LuAnn was the culprit. She'd always resented his divorce from Sheila, her mother and Paul's fourth lover. She was the older sister of Candy, who got pregnant—and married—six months into his tour. He might not have known except for Sheila's "Dear Paul" letter, beginning I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this Paul. They met in Honolulu. She looked so young and sweet in her mini-skirts, as sweet as those women in his dreams. They were married on the beach to the sounds of Elvis and Don Ho.

Sheila was smarter than Paul and certainly more ambitious. He simply wanted to build cabinets, while she took class after class until she became a nurse-practitioner. She made four times as much as Paul and suddenly, out of nowhere it seemed, expressed a liking for ballets and literary events. She became a Unitarian and Paul went to a service or two. They were sort of like Catholics and they drank a lot of wine. Sheila invited over Unitarian friends who made insane claims about provenance, body, and bubbles.

"Just yeast shit," Paul said, something he'd read in a book by Kurt Vonnegut, but the remark doomed his marriage. Little of it remained by then, and LuAnn was out of school.

Paul was left with the little house, which Sheila never liked anyhow. He grew vegetables and adopted a mutt dog, Ralph. He worked sixty-hour weeks because he was so sad inside. He began to make a lot of money and sometimes hired helpers.

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Paul's old friend Sammy Yates, who'd spent almost a year in the hospital after Vietnam, came to visit. He panted and leaned heavily on his walker. He said to meet him in the cafeteria and "Top of the World" played in Paul's head. Paul got out the words, "You're in this place, too?" and Sammy began to cry, but Paul couldn't lift an arm to comfort him. Sammy left a pouch of tobacco under Paul's blanket but the man in blue scrubs confiscated it before Paul could get a taste. What's it matter? Paul wondered.

"Meds good?" the doctor asked. "No pain?"

Yes, there had been pain, unbearable pain. The drugs took it away and he wanted to ask the doctor where it went.

"No pain at all," said the doctor. "You take it easy, soldier. Go to sleep. OK?"

"OK," Paul said.

"Thank you for your service."

The lights dimmed for another night and *McLintock* came on, Wayne at his most loutish, but it didn't matter. All Paul had to do was sleep.

Sometime the next day, or maybe the next week, the doctor stood with the woman who looked like his nameless lover, shuffling papers. The nameless woman smiled and he knew her, the love of his life. She and the doctor glowed like light bulbs, and turned dim. His head swirled.

She was Lover Number Five. He was at the garden store, loading two bags of concrete, when she backed up with an old Plymouth station wagon that rode low because of weak springs. She threw in bags of topsoil and Paul went over to help. "How many of these you buy?"

"Forty-nine," she said.

He frowned but offered to haul them in his truck. She smiled and he followed her into a realm of grand old houses, most in disrepair, some falling down, and unloaded the dirt. She had

erected two four by twenty raised beds where the dirt should go so he spread it, leaving one bag to plant an apple tree. When he finished, she appeared on the high back steps, and urged him inside to the deep kitchen sink. He washed his hands, then sat to a meal of eggplant and small, red potatoes, seasoned with Indian spices, followed by a bowl of tapioca pudding. “You have been so kind,” she said.

“My good deed for the day.” He looked around her kitchen. The wallpaper featured laurels of roses but they were streaked with age, and peeling. “I could build you some cabinets.”

“That would be more than kind. Let me ask you, Paul, could you leave here now, after all your fine work, and feel you'd had a good day?”

“Well, I--” He rose from his chair. “Sure.”

“There's no need.”

They made love in her dim bedroom. There appeared to be no walls and he looked down a long hall toward an ornate front door. A glass at its top held stars. As he entered her, he said, “Who are you?”

“Ah,” she said, hunching beneath him. “I'm a librarian.”

He paused halfway, holding pleasure as long as he could, thinking Heaven could offer no more than this. “Books and things,” he murmured.

“I'm a curator. I try to find what will last.”

He let go and fell into a place he could not reach the end of. When he left her, kissed her, he thought he said, “I can't do anymore.” He thought she said, “You can, Paul,” but then he found himself at home again, pouring a stiff Scotch. He fell asleep watching Randolph Scott in *Abilene Town.*

He went to the library, a multi-storied edifice deep in the downtown jungle, but he didn't know her name and asking for the curator of lasting things didn't take him far. One librarian sent him to Special Collections but the librarians there were ancient. He tried reconstructing his drive, starting from the garden store, but he couldn't remember the street, and in that rundown part of the city the houses all looked alike.

With a feeling of new life, Paul ripped away the catheters and vaulted over to the TV, where *The Green Berets*, so wrong it insulted, played. Why not at least *The Sands of Iwo Jima*, where Wayne portrayed a sad, vulnerable character?

He could not find a remote and had to step atop a chair to pull the plug. He felt like a young man, and they were trying to kill him with their drugs! His legs were as strong as ever and he strode toward the hall and threw the door open.

But this wasn't where he'd been. Ice covered wood and metal and the hall kept twisting, as if a tornado gripped it. A cold wind blew along the floor, freezing his bare feet, and he realized he was dreaming. Or was that chaotic hall his first vision of hell?

The nurse held up orange juice with a straw. His throat was dry. The juice was heavenly.

"Are we eating today?"

"Ice," he murmured.

"Ice cream? I think we can manage that. We appreciate your service, Paul."

The first did not turn out to be the last—rather, his sixth. Candy—or, as she corrected him, *Candace*—called one Saturday afternoon when he'd had a few too many. How he got to

sleep in those days. One time, he blacked out on his stumbling way to the bathroom, and woke to Ralph's cold nose on his cheek.

"I'm a free woman at last," Candace proclaimed. Her third husband died after a prolonged battle with lung cancer, or maybe it was his prostrate, and the children, hers, his, his, were all on their own. Her talking covered forty years. He didn't recognize his high school sweetheart in the adult woman but judged he hadn't known her in the first place. Smelly old Ralph the Second came to say hello and Candace scratched between his ears and rubbed his sagging belly. Paul liked her for that and put his arm around her, and with the glow from the gas fireplace some contentment set in. They kissed, undressed, and writhed about until they sweated, but nothing happened. He wasn't aroused. She fled to the bathroom. Paul stared at Ralph, who snored by the gas flames.

She had dressed again. "Funny, through all those years, we never ran into each other."

"Funny," Paul said.

"I never meant to hurt you," she said, pulling on her coat. "I was just a kid. I was going through a phase."

"Me, too."

She drew back, crying bitter tears. "And then you married my *sister."*

Lover Number Seven, Sybil, came along in the most prosperous period of Paul's life, when his modest cabinet business grew to accommodate millwork of all kinds. He hired Sybil to keep his books and to meet the public, because she looked like one of those sleek, cheerful women in his dreams. He resolved to keep things on a professional basis but one Friday night asked her to dinner.

“Where's this going?” she asked.

“Just dinner,” he said. “Weekends are a little lonely for me.”

“OK,” she said. “Just dinner. But I want you to know: I don't think workplace involvements are a good idea. And you're a lot older.”

At dinner she told him she'd had to quit at the car dealership because of all the men hitting on her.

“That's terrible,” Paul said, staring glassily at Sybil, who was a damn good-looking woman.

“I contacted an attorney. She said you need a paper trail so first take it up with your supervisor, but he was one of those louts who thought with his zipper. You drink too much, Paul. And you're overweight. Do you exercise regularly?”

She took him to a park with a half-mile track. He lumbered forward, panting, and she lapped him twice. “Stay with it, Paul,” she called out. He picked up his feet, inspired by her tight shorts.

Got so he hated going to work. He had to keep up with the antics of his employees, and no one wanted custom cabinets anymore. He sold particle board ready-mades with a maple veneer. Sometimes, Paul was drunk by mid-day. Sometimes, he stayed home to drink and left running the business to Sybil. She was better at it anyhow.

He was sixty-seven when he decided to sell out. Sybil took care of it and fetched a good price. She returned to the dealership, this time as a manager.

“Day One,” she said. “I keep a paper trail.”

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Paul woke to Sammy leaning near, feeding him ice cream with a plastic spoon. “You remember that asshole Colonel Rawls?”

The ice cream was difficult. He could barely open his lips.

“Hovered right over us in that little Loach. Like it was a fuckin’ football game.”

The colonel promised his boys ice cream after the battle, where seventeen Americans were killed. But since almost one hundred NVA died, the colonel proclaimed a victory. A Huey flew in the ice cream just at dusk.

“Slushy mess in that heat,” Sammy said.

After he closed down his business and Sybil moved on, Paul couldn’t get going. Ralph the Second, his truest friend, died. Paul brought home a beagle pup who was mischievous and friendly but he wasn’t Ralph. Then, when both of them were still able to walk, Sammy told him about the Rolling Prairie Diner, where used-up old men, and a few women, gathered for breakfast.

The lights came up a little and there was a new movie: *Angel and the Bad Man.* Paul loved that movie, mostly because of Gail Russell, playing the Quaker girl who nursed the outlaw back to health. She drew out the bad man’s tender side and Wayne was downright courtly. I’ve been selling John Wayne short, Paul thought.

Angel and the Bad Man was Ruth’s favorite movie. He began to cry because Ruth had only been gone a year.

“Dad,” said LuAnn, rushing to the bed. “Dad, we’re here. We’re all here.”

After Ruth died, he had no reason to live. He considered the matter calmly, logically. He couldn't walk. He had no appetite and had seen every movie ever made, even getting around to Doris Day because Ruth liked her. He wasn't good for a damn thing if he couldn't help Ruth.

He met her, his eighth lover, at the Rolling Prairie Diner. Her feet hurt and often she sat down between delivering bacon and eggs and refilling coffees. She was too old to be a waitress but all the lonely men loved her. She'd had a good word and a smile for them back when they still had a place in the world, and talked about cars and football and the glories of war.

Now that they were forgotten, she listened to their bad jokes and crackpot politics and outpourings of sorrow. They talked about busted marriages and children lost to drugs, and they were forgettable. They were overweight, they coughed from cigarettes, and sometimes they were drunk at nine in the morning. They had nothing to offer anyone, nor anyone to offer it to. Except Ruth, always there with her coffee, always prepared to listen.

Just a bent old lady, Paul thought, over his coffee and apple pie. Of course, he was old now, too, with Sammy his only friend. And Sammy refused go out anymore.

"Why do you do it?" Paul asked.

"Do what, honey?"

"Waitressing is hard. I mean, at your age—"

"Sometimes, I'm the only person they're gonna talk to all day. They need me."

"I think they *love* you," Paul said. "Would you like to go fishing?"

She owned an old boat but mostly they sat on the bank in camp chairs, a thermos of coffee and Ruth's oatmeal cookies between them. They brought in perch and catfish. Paul fileted them and Ruth fried them in corn meal.

She got sick and couldn't work anymore and Paul drove her to the hospital and cooked for her. Then he had his stroke and slowly, slowly she brought him back, though his legs were like noodles. They took care of each other, watching old movies and planning meals and once in a while, on nice days, getting out to the park, where they watched the birds.

When Ruth died, two dozen old men showed up for her funeral. Nobody knew who they were.

"Thank you for your service, Sergeant," said the doctor in the green shirt, a different doctor. Before moving on, he mumbled something to the nurse in red, who nodded and met Paul's eyes. "Yes, yes," she said. "Thank you for your service."

They gathered at the foot of his bed. He could focus on them for a moment until they blurred and dissolved. The son-in-law, Paul's grand-daughter, the nurse in red, Sammy on his walker, his eyes bulging and blurred. And his nameless lover from Accounting, only her head visible, leaning in. Why had he never learned her name?

Because he'd found her at last.

He came out from a downtown bar into a heavy rain. He hurried to his truck and sat, shivering, thinking I can't drive in this. He'd had only one margarita and maybe he should have another. Then again, alcohol didn't help much anymore. Drunk or sober, he was an old man edging up on oblivion.

"What the hell," he said, when the rain relented a little. His defroster wasn't up to the task and he drove with his window down three inches even though the rain struck his face and shoulder. He didn't know where he was going.

He got to thinking of the men who died the day the colonel sent out ice cream. He had forgotten their names but now they came to him: Hoss the bully, Krull with his folk songs, Snowball from Detroit, Harold the gentle one who cracked up, Felix from Philadelphia, and Screwy Louie who'd been bitten by a rat. The rain turned into drizzle and he was lost in the decaying city, among the tall, falling-down homes. But maybe his old truck was like the horse that knows the way, because he found himself in her driveway. "Good God," he said. "Look at that apple tree!"

She stood holding the back door. She was middle-aged now with streaks of gray hair. "Come on, Paul. All you have to do is climb those steps."

Those rickety old steps. He should offer to replace them.

"I've got coffee," his lover said. "I've got apple pie."

He couldn't open his eyes. He didn't want to, when there was nothing to see but John Wayne movies in this windowless room.

He sensed their gathering. He visualized them holding hands.

"He can still hear," LuAnn said. Finally, she could cross him off her list.

No, Paul: you're too bitter. She talked back even at age four but that's just how she was. Still, she'd lied to the doctor about his liking John Wayne.

Someone cried out. He heard a scraping: Sammy's walker. Suddenly, all the people, all five, sang:

> Show me the way to go home
> I'm tired and I want to go to bed

There was another verse Paul couldn't quite hear. He couldn't place the song, except it came from way back there. Maybe it was something her mother sang to LuAnn. No doubt LuAnn

planned it: a touching last moment they'd all remember. Oh, she was all right. Didn't put on airs like her mom.

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Paul climbed those brand-new steps two at a time. His lover didn't move from the door, waiting for him to kiss her. "I'm sorry," he said. "I got lost. I—I didn't know your name."

She stared for a long time. "It's Evelyn, of course. Sit down, Paul."

She brought him steaming coffee and half an apple pie. Not once in his life had he eaten half a pie, and every mouthful brought back memories. Of the senseless war. Of a skinny junior high crush named Margaret. Of his mother and father, fighting their losing battle to save the farm. He cried.

"Those are your apples, Paul."

He looked around the kitchen. There were still roses on the walls but the wallpaper was new. And—

"Cabinets," he said. "Beautiful cabinets."

Evelyn laughed. "You should know."

Perhaps they made love, but making love was the same as apple pie, the same as standing on strong legs, the same as breathing good air. She pulled on a white summer dress and put up her hair and they walked down the long hall, past sumptuous rooms and empty ones, until they stood in a shaft of sunlight bursting through the ornate door.

They stepped into the bright light and she handed him the keys. He'd always preferred a stick and loved shifting up to fifth in her little car, but really it was a cartoon car, because in moments they drove up the lane to the home place. No house anymore but birds everywhere, and

he could hear bees working. He lay back his head, closed his eyes, and breathed in the air sickly-sweet with lilacs.

Evelyn kissed him on the cheek and left him like something melting away. He looked up and saw geese flying north, and buzzards riding thermals beneath them. And he saw his lover Evelyn again, ablaze with light, almost invisible in her white sundress. She knelt by the ruined foundation as his mother once had, picking daffodils because they wouldn’t last another day.