

## UNDER THE HOOD

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It was dark when they got into the car and there was rain on the windshield. Just the slightest sprinkling, moistening the lens. Tincturing. She thought: This could be what love is like. Like this. The world looks like this on love. In love.

She put her hands on the steering wheel. She felt goose bumps on her arms. He got in beside her and shut the door.

"Can I drive?" she asked. She was glad. How nice that word was to think of. Glad. She was happy. Good dinner. Good wine. Nice boy.

"Can you drive?"

"I want to drive."

"Sure."

"You rock my world!" He did. So far, he did.

"You realize, if we get caught, we could end up going to jail. You will never get your license and I will never be able to drive again."

"Yes."

He reached into his pocket and gave her the key. She started the car. She had seen her father do this. Seen him do it. Seen others do it. Just like this. Just like this. Just like this. You could have a style of starting a car. She would. She stuck the key in. She shivered. The car roared to life. She felt as if she were sitting on top of a large animal.

"I can do this," she said. She put the car in gear. She would have to drive as if she meant it, as if she were legitimate. As if she had a right to.

She pulled out of the restaurant parking lot. She could hear the sound the tires made on the cement. She could feel the way the tires were moving. She — She would have to stop thinking about the tires.

In a turn or two, they would be on the highway. Now they were. Now it was just a matter of settling in. Keeping to a pace. Sticking to it. Music would help. She reached for the radio dial. Who drove this way? One hand on the wheel, one on the tuner? A boyfriend she had known once, who had not turned out well. Had bad taste in music. Or the kind of taste one really shouldn't be compulsive about. He was unsure of his taste. He would start playing a song, play it long enough for her to decide she liked it, then he would say it was really a bad song and he was tired of it. It wasn't taste at all. Just indecision, or cruelty. Or indecision resulting from cruelty. Luckily she'd dumped him.

Wow! That was close. She smiled and looked over at him. He was not like that. He did not care what was playing on the radio. He did not care — there were red lights in her rear view mirror. She could see, due

to a certain way the road turned here, the cars going the other way very clearly. This was something she shouldn't be watching. She looked back at him. He was looking ahead at the road with a kind of bemused expression on his face.

This was nice, but it could also mean a whole host of unfortunate things. What if it meant he was suicidal and that he let her drive because he wanted them to die some ridiculous, glamorous death together? Or maybe the whole thing was a dare. A sexy way to show he trusted her.

She preferred this idea and adopted it. The way she'd adopted him. On their way to a party, on the street. She'd put her arm through his and they'd pretended they'd come together. No one could understand how they'd met; they kept changing their story. It was a party for a mutual friend. The friend was graduating from a program in something —

It was all very good to be reviewing her life story here, but she needed to be paying attention. Not too much attention because she didn't want to look like she was watching for cops. Yikes there's one now! Steady, steady. As if you've seen nothing as if —

Was she crazy? If so, it had started this morning, when she had woken up with a start. From a dream in which she was stuck in a revolving door. The door started turning on its own. Faster, faster. She was carrying a dessert. If she dropped the dessert, she understood, she would be killed. Still holding. Still holding. She screamed and woke herself up.

The cop had not noticed. They were safely past. The way to do this was not to think about it.

"Did you see what you just passed?"

"Yes."

"You're incredible."

She looked over at him. He was smiling. He seemed sure of himself. Too sure. She would not, she suddenly realized, be able to depend on him. This was not new. There wasn't really anyone she could — well wanted to — depend on. She was almost on her own. This made her tired to think of. It would turn out wrong. He was supposed to say no, she couldn't drive his car illegally, and they were supposed to fight about it and he was supposed to win. But he didn't care about it at all. Maybe he was suicidal. How could he be suicidal after a night like this? It had been a nice night. Funny. And he was so cute.

Had she really thought that? Was she some kind of moron? She needed to concentrate. Be serious. On the world outside her window. Traffic was stopped or slowing ahead: red lights in lines into the distance. Why were there so many red lights? She braked suddenly, jerkily, just in time.

"Rubberneckers," he said.

She thought of this expression, which seemed both so apt and so unpleasantly physical. As if the cars were inhabited by dolls with melted necks. But what were they looking at? She turned too.

On the side of the road were three cars, one mangled, the other two stopped at odd angles. Two people stood looking at each other between the two cars. A third spoke to a policeman. They were — they were all slowing down to see if they could see death.

She did not want to see death. She thought of it too much as it was. She did not want to be one of those people who constantly thought about the end of things rather than the beginning.

The traffic began to thin; the cars ahead of her picked up speed. She followed suit. The wine had probably worn off by now. “So, tell me about your life,” she said.

He was quiet. He had fallen asleep. It was like a boyfriend to do this. She was just sorry. Boyfriends were often disappointing. But this one had so much promise. He was smart. His jokes were funny. He trusted her to do what she was doing now. But he didn’t care whether he lived or died.

This would not do. He wouldn’t pass muster with her mother. Not this one. Not this one either. Maybe the answer was to pick someone who didn’t. Stop trying to predict. Give up on her mother. Her father didn’t care. Why should the fact that her mother did give her mother some kind of special status in the approval department?

She would keep him, though, for now. He liked to have a drink and a laugh; tonight they had had a lot of both. They had gone on from the party to lots of nights like this one. Dinners with a lot of laughs. Followed by his place, because hers was too small. Restaurants were hers though — she found them. She had developed an ascending scale of favorites. Tonight’s was at the top. A place in the suburbs where she could just walk in and say, “Muscles, please” and they knew what she meant and brought them to her the way she liked. This was carving out a life.

But what had she earned? Good taste was not a career. Having boys like this was not having relationships. This was her mother speaking, or the admittedly unfair version of her mother lodged so firmly in her head. She disagreed, but this was the problem when one’s parents still walked the earth while one tried so hard to come into one’s own. Her mother’s generation — maybe just her mother — was always claiming credit for things. And demanding appreciation. But, she was sorry. She had the right to enjoy the freedoms that had been won for her and she should not have to win them again from her mother. After all, the idea that a young woman could not live on her own was outrageous, could not choose her own restaurant, insane. These were rights that seemed so fundamental it seemed ridiculous any one should ever have had to fight for them — and yet the older generation was not happy, relieved, or even proud to see their children exercise them. So why weren’t they happy? They were just annoyed. Annoyed to see how easy it was for them. Easy? Of course not. Life is never ever easy. Even she knew this.

Another dream: She has been told she has to lead a group of camels

across a desert. First she must feed them. One of them is sick. It keeps throwing up. It appears there is no way to help it. Then, she is given a medicine she is told will make the camel better. She gives it to it and it drops dead. She thinks she is supposed to learn something from this dream, but is not sure what. That she should be more caring? Should only travel alone? Should not consider a career in medicine? Should think twice about having babies?

Recently, she and her mother had gone to a party at the home of a rich family friend. On the way home, she had joked that she could get used to living like that. Her mother had said, you know, you may be a little too difficult to please. And she had smiled and said, isn’t that how you taught me? And her mother had frowned at her, misunderstanding. She had meant it conspiratorially, but her mother had refused to join in. She had meant it — it was a perfectly accurate comment — but she was pathetically heart-broken to discover that her mother had begun disassociating herself from the parts of her daughter — even the smart, funny parts — that she now felt were the cause of her daughter’s life problems. It was wrong. It was inaccurate to pick out some parts and not others. Her elbow would not find the perfect man only to be turned down by her knee.

The thing about men was that unlike her mother, she had grown up in a time when women could know everything there was to know about men in advance. In graphic detail. Why shouldn’t she choose her boys like cars and discard them when they failed to live up to dealers’ descriptions? These days the dealers’ descriptions were pretty accurate. But what about the mystery? Her mother would say. Fuck the mystery. She wanted facts. How had the mystery helped her mother with her father? But that was hitting below the belt. The point was, she did not agree that her father was a bad choice; only that her mother had guessed based on inadequate information. And she, an only child, had been left to pick up the pieces. Or piece through the pieces. Or maybe they had left her in pieces. Did she care? Anyway, now she had to learn how to feed camels.

She pumped the gas pedal. She had better get on with it. It was time to get Mr. Rock My World home.

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By the time they reached the outskirts of the city, she was, she told herself, no longer drunk. Just tired. There was no one on the streets. A long time back, he had woken up again and lit a cigarette and for most of the ensuing trip, they had not spoken. She thought that this outcome was so obvious her mother could have predicted it. And so the next obvious question was, Why hadn’t she?

She took a drag of his cigarette. Cigarettes were so ten years ago. She

imagined the myriad ways he could permanently ruin his health. He would drink too much or rarely exercise. When he was older, he would look back on this night that wasn't with regret. He didn't look like it though. He didn't look like he was planning on regretting anything, she thought, with a pang. It wasn't the sex. They had taken care of that. And if they hadn't, she could have trapped him. Pulled over to the side of the road, and while he was still sleeping, done any number of things to him. But that was the preliminaries. And the preliminaries weren't the problem. It was what came next. That was usually where she failed. She wanted to get further along in the relationship, where people learned to overlook failures, or grew to live with them, saw them as necessary evils. She wished she knew more about further along; she didn't get there much. Perhaps it was her fault. She who caused the trouble. Had the most fences. Because she kept wondering whether she'd missed something. Checking under the hood, which, since they were often stark naked at the time, was perhaps too accurate a metaphor and was furthermore distracting. But tonight she had felt as if — she had been on the point of blurting out that she thought he might be the — and then —

Still, he wasn't running. He was waiting for her now, to say something? It was after all his car.

She had parked outside the apartment he was renting, where she had been staying off and on. What she really wished to do was to leave him off. Take the car and leave. It hadn't been him after all, it had been the car she'd been after. And now that she had it, she would simply toss him from it, like a pit from a peach. And yet she didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay. And he didn't seem to be leaving. He seemed simply to be sitting in the passenger seat. It was time to get out. She opened the door and stood up. The night air was fresh and cool and wet. Standing up, she realized she was not as sober as she had thought. She stumbled a step.

"Wait," he said and scooted after her, over to the driver's seat. She lurched forward and steadied herself on the front light. She looked back at him. He sat leaning forward, hands on the steering wheel. She had the feeling just for a minute, that she was being hit by a car in very slow motion. Simultaneously, it occurred to her that this story did not have to have a sad ending. She maneuvered herself around to the other front headlight and paused, just for a moment. What would her mother think of her if she saw her like this, wrapped around the front of a car? Her body spasmed and she leaned over and threw up on the street side of the right fender. Maybe, just maybe he had been looking in a different direction. What had she eaten? Whatever it was, there was apparently a great deal of it. Again, again. She felt hands on her shoulders and someone holding her hair back.

"If you get drunk and throw up, always remember to have someone hold your hair back." Had her mother really said that to her, one night, a

long time ago?

Yes, she had. The night her father had left them. Stormed out. Actually, he hadn't stormed out, but he had left, gradually over weeks and weeks, her mother having a little more wine each night without meaning to, or at the very least without counting. She could think this now but then, she really hadn't understood what she was seeing when she saw her mother stumble a little more each night on the way past her room to bed, as it became more and more clear he wasn't coming back. She hadn't understood enough about heartbreak, let alone drinking, to expect her mother's wrong turn, right, after her door, to the bathroom, instead of left and on to bed ("Mom!" she had called out, "It's the other way!"). She had heard her mother mumble something and then the sound of her vomiting. She had gone in sleepily and her mother had showed her, between heaves, how to hold her hair back so she could throw-up in a ladylike fashion. At the time she had thought it was the ultimate in hypocrisy. Could you kill someone politely? Steal fairly?

Now that she had stopped, the hands gently lifted her and helped her back to the passenger seat. And, with a hum, lowered her seat so she was in a sleeping position. The hands closed the door behind her and disappeared. Now what?

The driver's door opened. "Where to?" a voice said. She heard the key turn in the ignition.