

## **SPEEDING AWAY**

Adam Berlin

### *Green Flag*

The rental car company screwed up. All the economy cars were gone from the lot, which was fine with us. Instead of a cheap Ford Contour, Phil and I started our engines in a spanking-new, red-hot Trans Am with eight cylinders under the hood. The kind of car we used to say had balls. The destination of our road trip was Indianapolis so the car seemed appropriate. And this was probably our last big hurrah together.

It took us sixteen hours to drive to Harry's wedding. We left New York at eight PM, got stuck in traffic on the Jersey Turnpike, missed an exit around Stroudsburg, my fault, missed another exit just past Pittsburgh, my fault again, hit a detour inside the Ohio border, took a two hour nap at a truck stop near Columbus and made it to Indianapolis by noon the next day.

To pass the time on the road we talked about Harry's wedding. I made a wager that Harry and his bride-to-be wouldn't last three years. I'd met her once. A cute Midwestern blonde with big tits that Harry had described in detail before he started getting serious with her. Big nipples, he'd said. Big, brown, firm nipples. I told Phil that once Harry got bored of sucking on those tits, he'd get a roving eye and move on. Phil didn't know either way. He didn't know Harry except through me and he'd never met Harry's fiancée.

"I shouldn't even be going to this wedding," Phil said, his Yankees cap pulled half over his eyes. "I don't know why I'm doing this."

"Because you're my date," I said. "And you'll look great in that strapless party dress I picked out for you."

"I think I've met Harry twice in my life."

"He likes you. He specifically said I should bring you along."

"I'm happy to take a drive, get out of the city for a few days."

"A wedding's as good an excuse as any."

Phil's excuse was coming up soon. He and Melissa were getting hitched a coincidental six months to the day after Harry's wedding.

"Indianapolis," Phil said.

"Free as the highway," I said and stepped on the gas.

At least I was. And maybe Phil could pretend to be free as the Trans Am sped forward. So what if the date had been set. The rings bought. The catering

hall booked. So what if he'd settled for marriage. We were on the road and, as I told my Humanities class, the road represented freedom or at least the illusion of freedom. When Oedipus tries his best to flee the warning of the Delphic Oracle, to assert his free will, he hits the road.

"Who's this girl you promised to take back?" Phil said.

"I don't know. Her name's Lila."

"Lila. I hope she's hot. What did Harry say about her?"

"He just asked if we'd take her back with us."

We passed a dead raccoon on the side of the road and a few feet later the remains of a dead deer. There was meat and blood all over the place. I'd never seen so much roadkill. The thick tires bumped over the mess and I sped ahead on the dark highway, just us and the lonely trucks taking goods across America.

We got to the Indianapolis Omni at noon, jaded and exhausted. The bulk of the out-of-town guests had already arrived, by plane, and were drinking Black Label scotch and smoking cigarettes in the honeymoon suite. Harry was genuinely glad to see us and we shook hands with all his actor friends, had some scotch, and said we were going to crash. Harry told us the rehearsal dinner started at six. One of the actors told Harry he didn't need to rehearse. Another asked Harry why he wasn't off book yet. They were a real bunch of cutups. We said see-you-laters to the actor friends and shook Harry's hand once again and went to our room. We watched tv for a while, looked over the room-service menu, called up the front desk to put in a wake-up call for five and got into our queen-size beds.

"Harry seems happy," I said.

"How do you want him to feel? It's the day before he's getting married."

"I'd be crying."

"How long have you known him?"

"I don't really know him that well. I worked with him for five years."

"He respects you. You can tell."

"I'm his hero."

"Right. I feel strange getting invited to the rehearsal dinner. I don't know any of those guys."

"You do now. Just think of it as practice for your rehearsal dinner. You can watch Harry mingle with his new in-laws. Pick up some pointers."

### *Lap 1*

I took the wake-up call, a polite Midwestern voice telling me this was the wake-up call. Phil couldn't get out of bed. He was worn out from the trip. I was too but I figured I owed it to Harry to make a quick showing. I also figured some women might be there. I put on my jacket and tie and left Phil sleeping.

The directions to the country club had come with the wedding invitation. I opened the envelope, looked over Harry's name and his fiancée's name written in gold, then checked the Xerox copy of the hand-drawn map. I hit the switch to open the windows and drove past small lakes and expensive houses. It felt good to be somewhere where no one knew me, in a place I'd never been. Even the smallest things passed for adventure these days. I thought of the readings I assigned in my Humanities class, characters like Ulysses and Dante and Lear all going on their archetypal journeys. For me, Indianapolis would have to do. I pulled into the parking lot, adjusted my tie in the rearview mirror.

No one was in the banquet hall yet, just a couple of bartenders in white shirts and black bow ties uncorking bottles of wine, so I walked out and walked around the grounds of the club. They had some well-manicured lawns, a pretty lake with a family of swans, the fluffy newborns swimming in unison behind their mother, a dozen tennis courts, half clay and half hard surface. There was a golf course too and I walked out on the green and pretended to knock in a couple of putts.

When I got back to the club it was full. I said hello to Harry and he introduced me to his family. We shook hands all around. I spoke to Harry's divorced father for a while, and to Harry's aunt, a well-preserved fifty-year-old with an aerobicized body, also divorced, and then I stood around with Harry's actor friends who traded stories about plays they'd been in together way back when in some theater group. When their talk moved to extra work, I went for my third bourbon. I talked to the bartender for a while. He'd lived in Indianapolis his whole life. He said the Speedway was worth checking out. He asked which guy was getting married and I pointed to Harry.

The food was brought out. Big platters of ribs, fried chicken, potato salad, corn on the cob, salad with bacon bits, biscuits, chunks of butter. This was the Midwest and as we drove towards Indianapolis the people eating in the truck stops had become fatter and fatter. I looked at Harry. He'd be skinny his whole life but his wife-to-be was a different story. If they ever left New York

City for good, gave up walking the streets and living the fast-paced life, his fiancée would come home to pasture in more ways than one. I helped myself to a couple of ribs and a chicken breast and some salad, and sat down at one of the far tables. Some of Harry's actor friends sat down at my table and then a couple of women sat down. I checked them out, smiled at the prettiest one. She was a possibility.

The waitress came around with wine but I stuck with my bourbon. I was working my knife and fork, separating some meat from a rib bone, when Harry pulled up a chair next to me.

"I really appreciate your taking Lila back to New York."

"No problem. Where is she?"

"She missed her flight in."

"That's too bad."

"She was getting a new nose piercing for the wedding and it got infected. She called from the emergency room. She's flying in tomorrow morning."

"Got to watch out for those nose piercings."

"I guess the hoop she wanted to wear was pretty thick so she put a nail through the hole to widen it and it got infected. The doctor told her the nail must have been rusty."

"You're kidding."

"She's a wild woman, but once you get used to Lila you'll get a kick out of her. She's really smart."

One of Harry's actor friends started singing "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow" and the rest of the actor friends joined in, harmonizing like they were doing some fag musical in the Village. I felt like telling them that if Harry was such a jolly good fellow maybe he would have thought twice about hooking me up with his genius friend Lila. The thought of her infected nose made me sick. The actor friends were singing at the top of their lungs, lifting their glasses in a choreographed toast. I gave up trying to eat my ribs politely and picked one up in my hands.

### *Lap 2*

"How was it?" Phil said.

"It was all right."

"What kind of food did they have?"

"Ribs and chicken."

"I can't believe how tired I am."

Phil's feet stuck out from the covers. He still had his Yankees cap on.

"This Lila might be bad news."

"Why's that?"

"She sounds like a freak."

I told him the story. Phil started to laugh his high-pitched laugh.

"What was Harry thinking?" I said.

"What were you thinking? Why did you say you'd drive her back to the city?"

"What did you want me to say?"

"No," Phil said. "You could have said no."

"I couldn't do that. He asked a favor. He invited me to his wedding and asked if I'd do him a favor."

Phil rubbed his eyes, sat up for a second, and lay back down. He started laughing again, adjusted his cap.

"Let me teach you a new word," he said. "It begins with N."

"Save your breath."

I clicked on the TV. They were having reruns of *Family Feud*. The number one answer for *Favors you do for your neighbors when they're away* was *Take care of their pets*.

Phil said he was sort of hungry. We decided to go out. I changed into jeans and a T-shirt and Phil got dressed. He called up Melissa just to say hello. I felt like asking him why he had to check in with her but I didn't. I listened to him say good-bye. I couldn't hear what she said on her end but Phil didn't say he loved her. Maybe he wanted to but he knew I was listening and that I would bother him about it the rest of the night. Phil had his own ammunition. I'd promised to drive Lila back to New York.

We took the elevator down. The Trans Am stood out in the parking lot, its polished chrome picking up the light from the hotel. Phil took the wheel and we drove along the strip that was the same strip all over America. We passed a McDonald's and a Burger King, a Bonanza and two Dairy Queens.

"There's no culture here," Phil said. "Nothing."

"It's a new country."

"Beyond that. There's no care. Look at these buildings. They're all the same. No care for beauty, aesthetics."

"No humanity."

"I'm putting on the air conditioner," Phil said.

He hit the switch to close the windows. It was a new car and the air conditioning worked quickly.

"When did you get so interested in architecture?" I said.

"I'm just saying. Look at this place."

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't your wife-to-be take an architecture course at The New School last semester?"

"Here we go."

"You're right. It's ugly here. Ugly. Not a Parthenon in sight."

"What are you? Jealous?"

"Not me."

"There's a lot to be said for seeing a woman for more than one night. Besides, you end up hurting them. You tell me so yourself. The way they look at you when you split without asking them for their number."

"I never promise them anything more."

"But they expect more," Phil said.

He kept driving down the strip. I looked out the window and watched the people in the passing cars.

"That's their problem," I said. "I never say I'll see them again. And if I do see them again, I never say I'm interested in having a real relationship."

"I know. You never promised them a rose garden. So what? You think they believe you? People aren't like that. You end up hurting them anyway."

"If I don't make any promises, I'm off the hook."

Phil stepped on the gas. I could tell he liked the power an eight-cylinder engine could deliver. We passed a Kentucky Fried Chicken and a third Dairy Queen.

"One night stands," I said. "Classic one night stands. Hit and run. It's what all men want."

"You don't even want it. All those women and you're still bored. That's why you're here."

"Don't worry about me. As long as you're happy growing old together and looking at the different types of architecture together, then I'm happy."

"I'm happy with my decision. When you're living in some old age home, babbling to yourself and drooling spittle on your bib, maybe we'll come and visit your lonely ass."

"Slow down," I said.

There were two women with long blonde hair walking across the parking lot in front of a Dunkin' Donuts. Phil slowed the car. I directed him to pull

into the lot. Practically every woman I'd seen around here was blonde and most were overweight but these two weren't bad. I hit the switch to open the windows. The women looked at the car and kept walking. I told Phil to drive alongside of them.

"Hello," I said.

They kept walking.

"We're from New York. Is there a good place to go out around here? Meet some nice Indiana women? We're tired of those cynical New Yorkers."

They kept walking. One looked up and sort of smiled but the other looked worried. They'd probably heard stories about the Big Apple and all the lunatics there.

"No suggestions?" I said.

"There's a TGI Fridays about a mile down," the woman who had smiled said.

Phil was keeping pace with the walking women, easing the car forward.

"Why don't you two hop in and we'll drive over there and get some drinks? We're good guys. We're teachers. Our friend's getting married and we're here for the wedding. Come on, we'll tell you all about the big bad city."

"I've been to New York," the woman said. "It's not so big or bad. Besides, my husband wouldn't be too happy if I went out."

"To love, honor, and cherish. Far be it from me to cut into those vows. By the way, what kind of donuts did you buy?"

"Glazed," the woman said.

"I knew it. I was telling my buddy here that you two looked like glazed-donut types."

"What does that mean?"

"Interpret it as you see fit. Anyway, have a good night. Enjoy your glazed donuts."

"Enjoy the wedding," the woman said.

"As long as it's not mine," I said.

Phil took off out of the parking lot. There was hardly anyone on the road and Phil stepped on the gas and we moved down the strip, broad and freshly paved like an Indianapolis road should be, our red Trans Am cruising smoothly, and I kept the window down and let the wind blow into my face and my hair, almost blinding me, making me feel alive and free and Phil could get married and Harry could get married, but I made no promises and I kept my word to myself. Sometimes I even said the words out loud to the bathroom

mirror when I came home after a one night stand, said the words that any hero worth his salt would say. *Know Thyself*. That's what I wrote on the board when I described the Delphic Oracle to my Humanities class and the two maxims written in stone outside. *Know Thyself* and *Nothing in Excess*. One out of two wasn't bad. I knew myself. I knew I could never settle down forever. So far I had kept my word to myself and it felt good at this speed. The lights stretched green all the way down the strip and Phil kept driving and it felt like we were in the middle of nowhere, just us and the black road and the white lines and the lights of the different fast-food places guiding us along.

We pulled into a place called Steak and Shake because we'd never seen one before. It was a chain but at least it was new. Phil had a burger and a shake and I had a shake, and Phil asked me to tell him the story about Lila again. He wanted to hear the part about the rusty nail. He laughed his high-pitched laugh.

### *Pit Stop*

On the day of the wedding we drove into the city. It was awful, not a nice piece of architecture anywhere. The streets were deserted and most of the buildings looked shut down. There were signs all over the city urging the Pacers to win the NBA title. Basketball and the Indianapolis 500 seemed to be the two big items in town. We drove over to the Speedway. It was closed but we had driven eight hundred miles and we wanted to see the racetrack. We went through a NO TRESPASSING sign and parked under the bleachers. The race had been the week before and there was still trash all over the place. Phil got out his camera and took a shot of me holding an empty champagne bottle, the party over in back of me, the rows of bleachers stretching high and far. We jumped the fence and took some pictures of us running on the racetrack, pretending to be chased by cars. We wanted to capture the illusion of speed as we ran from the camera.

"I hope these come out," Phil said.

"Get one more of me running away," I said.

"Go," Phil said and I started to run and heard the click of the camera.

We went over to the Indy Museum, paid our admission to a fat blonde cashier, looked at the old cars and the racing memorabilia. Some of the people seemed to be getting a real thrill out of the museum but Phil and I were just killing time. We ran into Harry's father next to one of the pace cars on display.

We shook hands with him and he introduced us to Uncle Dick and we both shook Uncle Dick's hand. I said we were looking forward to tonight's wedding. Uncle Dick said he heard we were driving a special friend of the family back to New York. Uncle Dick and Harry's father looked at each other with shit-eating grins. They shook our hands again and walked away.

"Did you see that?" I said.

"I saw it."

"Uncle Dick was laughing at us. Uncle Dick. Not Richard. Not Rick. Dick. Uncle Dick. Asshole. Why would a grown man choose to go by the name of Dick?"

"One of the great mysteries," Phil said. "Why don't you bring it up in class discussion one day? Maybe when the topic is *Favors you do for friends*."

We left the museum and drove around the city some more. There wasn't much to see. We decided to head back to the hotel, take a nap before the big night. On the way we stopped at a McDonald's.

"Hey guys!"

We turned around. Two of Harry's actor friends were sitting in a plastic booth eating McNuggets.

"What's up?" I said.

"We heard you guys are driving Lila home."

"You know Lila?"

"We know of her. We heard she had a little accident."

The two of them busted up laughing. I felt like creating a little accident for the two actors. Sticking a nail through their noses or maybe just piercing their heads with my fist. We found a table at the other end of the room and sat down. Phil asked if I remembered that word he'd taught me that started with N and rhymed with go. I told Phil to choke on his Big Mac.

### Lap 3

The phone rang and the Midwestern voice told me that this was the wake-up call. We showered and put on our suits and ties and promised each other we wouldn't drink too much.

"We have to leave at nine tomorrow," Phil said. "Nine AM sharp. I don't care if you pick up a woman tonight. I have to teach on Monday so you better be ready. I'm not some lazy college adjunct."

"We drove eight hundred miles for this. This could be our last big night

out together. Let's not leave before we get there."

"I'm just saying I have to teach."

"Don't worry. I'll be ready at nine. I know how those high school girls long for you."

We left the hotel and drove to the wedding. It was at the same country club but a tent had been set up on the grounds behind the main building and the parking lot was full. We picked up our table numbers and walked onto the grounds. In the background two people were playing golf. We walked over to the chairs that had been set up for the service and took a seat in the back row. The wedding party was gathering on the porch of the country club behind us, a collection of black tuxedos and loud pink dresses. A photographer stood off to our left, checking the light. Another man stood behind a video camera mounted on a tripod. Harry and his wife would have this memory on film and on tape for generations to come. They would embellish the stories of the night and when the camera panned to me and Phil they'd tell about us and how we'd driven sixteen hours to come to the wedding and how we'd driven sixteen hours back with Lila.

"Where is she?" Phil said.

"I don't know. Maybe she's still in the hospital."

One of Harry's actor friends turned to us. He said they were thinking about stealing some golf carts and tearing around the course once the wedding got started. I knew it was just talk but I didn't call him on it.

A three-piece orchestra started playing some famous wedding song I didn't know the name of. The procession started. Everyone stopped talking. I turned to Phil and could feel the smirk stretching my mouth but he looked solemn and serious. He was watching the best man and maid of honor coming down the grass aisle so I looked at them too. They split apart and moved to either side of the canopy and then came Harry with his mom and dad, separated by Harry and separated in life, and then the bride came, her cleavage exposed in a low-cut wedding dress. A couple of people were quietly crying. A woman a few rows down wiped at her eyes with a tissue. In the distance, someone was running across the golf course. The priest gave a little speech and read the vows and the *I do's* were said and it was official. The instruments picked up again. The figure running across the fairway was getting closer. The procession went back up the aisle to the country club while the photographer clicked away. People applauded and started saying how beautiful the bride looked. I looked towards the bar to make sure it was open for business.

"Another one bites the dust," I said.

"It wasn't a bad ceremony."

The figure took on more shape as she came closer. She tripped in a sand trap, got up, and started running again. She was a big woman in a strapless pink party dress. Big arms, defined biceps, and her lats were almost as well defined. Where her nose was supposed to be there was a bandage.

"Holy shit," Phil said.

"No," I said.

"That's the word," Phil said. "She's a brute."

Lila stopped and sneezed five times in a row. She wiped at her nose bandage with the back of her hand and ran over to Harry.

"Sixteen hours," I said. "It's a sixteen-hour drive."

"A friend of the family."

"Eight hundred miles," I said.

"What the hell was she doing on that golf course?" Phil said and laughed his high-pitched laugh.

We walked over to the bar and stood in line. One of the maids of honor in her loud pink dress was ordering a vodka tonic. She looked good even in the ridiculous outfit. She was a possibility but I couldn't really focus on her. On the steps of the clubhouse Lila stood barefoot. She was picking pieces of the fairway out of her high heels. Then she started spitting on her shoes and rubbing them clean. I turned my head so I wouldn't have to see her.

We got our drinks, bourbon rocks for me and scotch rocks for Phil, and we stood on the deck of the country club. Phil didn't know anyone here and I hardly knew anyone. We ate a couple of hors d'oeuvres and watched Harry touching base with as many people as possible. He was smiling and kissing cheeks and shaking hands.

"It's a lot of work," Phil said.

"This is just the beginning."

"Do your students know what a cynical bastard you are?"

"Never. I play the part of the loving teacher when I'm in front of my class. That's why they pay me the big money."

"There's Harry's father," Phil said.

"There's Uncle Dick," I said.

Harry came over and shook our hands and thanked us for coming and driving all that way to share the special day and we said it was a beautiful wedding and that he looked sharp up there. Harry said he was nervous as hell until

he said *I do* and then he felt better. I said we couldn't tell.

"What's the story with Lila?" Phil said.

"She's an old friend of mine. Why? What's wrong?"

"I was just wondering what the connection was."

"You guys don't mind, do you?"

"No problem," I said.

Phil looked at me. Harry said he had to make the rounds. We said we'd see him in the tent and shook his hand. We ate a few more hors d'oeuvres. We had another drink. The sun started to set.

The caterers went around telling us to find our tables and Phil and I walked over to the tent. We were sitting with Harry's actor friends. They were still talking about stealing the golf carts. They told us they'd been drinking all day. One of the actors asked how we were getting on with Lila and they all laughed. I looked at Phil and his jaw was starting to work. I hadn't seen that pulse in his mandible for close to a year. The other guy ended up with a broken nose and a punched kidney, probably pissed blood for a few days after that fight. A wedding brawl might be fun but Harry would never forgive us.

"You like her?" I said to the actor friend who'd asked about Lila.

"Not enough to drive her home."

"You keep asking about her. Maybe you want me to hook the two of you up. You strike me as a guy who doesn't get laid much and I hear she likes thespians."

"I was just joking around," the actor said.

I looked at Phil's jaw and it was a little more relaxed.

The band introduced the newlyweds. Harry and his new wife went out on the dance floor and danced to their song, a bad cover of Blues Traveler's "Run-Around." Wine was passed and salads were served. I was hungry. My back was to most of the tables and when I turned around I saw Lila sitting alone. Everyone at Table 14 had decided not to show up. That was the kind of power Lila had. Lila sneezed five times in a row and wiped her hand over her wet nose bandage.

Harry's sister came over to our table. She said hello to everyone and kissed Harry's actor friends on their cheeks. There was a free seat next to me and Harry's sister asked if we'd mind if Lila sat at our table since she was by herself. Phil and I didn't say anything. The others said it was fine. That's how it is with occasions. A favor is asked. A favor is granted. We were driving her home, now we'd be sitting with her, extending our journey with Lila a few extra hours, still

eight hundred miles to go.

Lila came over. Her husky shoulder slammed into mine as she sat down but she was oblivious. She had finished her salad at her own table, or at least half of it. The other half was stuck between her teeth.

"It was a beautiful wedding, don't you think?" she said to me.

"Did you see it?"

"I could tell it was beautiful."

Lila's eyes had the faraway look of an insane woman. I have a schizophrenic aunt, a classic schizophrenic who needs plenty of medication to keep the people on the tv from talking to her. This woman had the same look in her eyes. Lila was not the kind of woman a groom asks a guest to drive halfway across the country. I looked across the room at Harry mingling with Uncle Dick. I thought about going after Harry, breaking his thin frame in two and sending him to his own emergency room.

Lila sneezed five times in a row and on the last sneeze a piece of lettuce flew out of her mouth and landed on my plate. I pushed the rest of my salad away.

"I'm a vegetarian," she said.

"I can see that."

The actor friends were watching me and I stared them all down.

"I love weddings," Lila said.

"Then today should be a great day for you."

"It is. I was married for six months, but we didn't have a big wedding like this. He left me."

"No kidding."

"He wasn't a very nice man. But he gave me a beautiful boy."

"You have a son?"

"Jeremalilla."

"Jeremalilla?"

"Yes. Jeremalilla." Her face lit up when she said his name, a piece of arugula at the center of her smile. "It has Lila sort of in it. Jeremalilla. See?"

I could picture Jeremalilla getting the shit beaten out of him in the schoolyard for his ridiculous name.

"He's only two. It's the first time I've been away from him."

"Where did you leave him?"

"At a neighbor's house. She has two boys of her own. I live in Portland. Portland, Oregon. Not Portland, Maine. I'm going to visit my sister in New

York. That's why you guys are driving me there."

"That explains it."

"What time are we leaving?" she said.

"Nine. Nine sharp."

The waiters brought out the dinner. Lila traded me her filet mignon for my portabello mushroom. She concentrated on her food and I concentrated on mine. The band took a break. I asked Phil if he wanted another drink. I went up and got a bourbon rocks and a scotch rocks. The bartender was the same guy I'd spoken to the night before. He asked if I'd gone to the Speedway and I said it was great. I went back to the table and Lila was talking to Phil and when I gave Phil his drink he said he was going to the bathroom. I said I would too.

We walked through the tent, past the lawn where two men were taking away the chairs from the ceremony, and up the steps to the clubhouse.

"You're not going to believe this," Phil said.

"What?"

"We just had a nice little conversation."

"I saw. How much of the portabello did she have between her teeth?"

"Plenty. She just told me how she knows Harry."

"How does she know him?"

There was a line to the bathroom. Phil and I decided to go out and take a leak behind the cars in the lot. We walked outside, looked around, stood behind a van and pissed into the fields. The golf course spread before us, empty now, the brightest stars starting to show.

"Listen to this," Phil said. "She told me she was Harry's first. So I said, 'Harry's first what?' She says, 'His first lay.' Then she says to me, 'Do you know how I knew it was his first time? Because he was embarrassed. He was fucking me and then his dick slipped out and he thought I could tell he was inexperienced.' Then she started laughing and said, 'Isn't that stupid? I mean, all guys' dicks slip out. Doesn't your dick slip out once in a while?'"

"She said that?"

"Her words."

"What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Fucking bastard," I said. "He's pawning off his maiden lay on us."

"Tomorrow's going to be a long day," Phil said.

We shook out and zipped up and started back to the country club. Harry's nephews were working on Harry's car. They'd written *Congratulations* on the

hood with shaving cream and they'd tied soda cans to the rear fender. On the top of the car, they'd secured a giant stuffed animal, a yellow duck with a bright orange bill.

"Good job, kids," I said.

"Thanks," one of the nephews said.

"Put a lot of shaving cream on the windows," I said. "That way it's harder for them to drive. Cover every inch of that glass."

"Good idea," the kid said and started unloading the shaving cream on the windshield.

"You'll be a great father one day," Phil said.

We walked back to the tent. Harry's actor friends were all on the dance floor. Plates were being cleared and Lila sat alone at the table. She had that faraway look going, that schizophrenic look, and I wondered how crazy she really was. We went over to the dance floor. Harry's aunt checked me out, looking sleek for an older woman, black dress, black hat, holding a cigarette. Phil elbowed my ribs. Harry's aunt waited for me to ask her to dance but I wasn't in the mood. After a while she turned away.

"She hates you now," Phil said.

"So what. She should realize she's too old."

Harry was dancing wildly, kicking his legs out while his bride danced farther down the dance floor with the best man. The cake was brought out and the musicians announced the cutting of the cake. Harry's father made a toast to his son and his new daughter and then the best man spoke, recounting how Harry met his wife. Everyone applauded. The photographer had Harry and his bride pose in front of the cake. First Harry held the knife. Then his new wife held it. Harry's actor friends yelled out something about a castrated husband. They were drunk. Phil and I walked back to our table and sat down. Lila's unfocused eyes came back and she looked at us.

"Are you having fun?"

"Tons," I said.

"Me too. Except for the allergies. I think I'm allergic to wheat."

"You're a vegetarian."

"Fresh wheat. The wheat in the wheat fields."

"What were you doing on the golf course?" Phil said.

"I was taking a little nature hike, but I got lost. A man started screaming at me because I moved his white ball. It's nice to see Harry so happy."

"Absolutely," I said.

"Don't you love weddings?"

"I hate them."

"He thinks marriage is settling," Phil said.

"I think they're beautiful if they're based on love. Why are you so anti-marriage?"

"I just am."

"Even though I had a bad experience, I still love them. It's a real connection. They're full of joy."

Lila sneezed five times in a row and snot bubbled out of her nose bandage. She wiped it away with the back of her hand. She was making me sick. I watched two waiters pick up the wedding cake and move it off the dance floor.

"What do you guys do?" Lila said.

"We're teachers," I said.

"What do you teach?"

"We both teach English. I teach Humanities at Hunter College and Phil teaches at a Catholic girls school."

"It must be great being a teacher," she said. "I think I'd like that."

Lila in front of a classroom. It was a disturbing image. What kind of damage would she be capable of doing? What would the kids say behind her muscular back? How would parents react to this woman teaching their progeny? What sort of values would she impart?

"It's a job," I said.

The waiters served the wedding cake with ice cream on the side. Lila dug in. I asked Phil if he wanted another drink.

"Nine o'clock," he said.

"We're leaving at nine, right?" Lila said.

"On the dot," Phil said. "I have to teach Monday morning."

"I baked some cornbread for the trip. With diced Good and Plentys in them. What room are you guys in?"

"We'll meet in the lobby at nine," I said. "We'll have the car out front. We have to get a fast start."

"I'll pack tonight," Lila said. She had a glob of white icing on her chin.

Coffee was served, dessert plates were cleared, and many of the guests started to leave. The band slowed down the music. Lila wandered over to the dance floor and Harry went over to her and the two of them started to dance.

"Let's hope he doesn't slip," I said.

"How could she tell me that?" Phil said.

"Look at her."

"I'm looking. I'll be looking all day tomorrow."

Harry's actor friends came back to the table. They were still talking about stealing the golf carts. One of the actors had cigars and he passed them around but Phil said we were leaving soon. I looked over the women on the dance floor. Nobody inspired me. I hadn't had enough to drink. I just wasn't that interested and I was ready to leave. The trip didn't seem worth it. I hardly knew Harry. I didn't like his friends. I guessed I'd see even less of Harry in the city now that he was married, and less than what I'd seen him meant not seeing him at all.

"Should we call it a night?" I said.

"Whenever you're ready," Phil said.

"Let me just say good night to Harry."

We walked over to the side of the dance floor and waited for the song to end. The band went into a faster song and Lila started dancing to it, spinning in solitary circles, letting her arms flutter around the air. Harry came over to us.

"Congratulations, Harry," I said.

"Are you guys leaving already?"

"We're tired," I said. "We have a trip ahead of us."

"I really appreciate your coming all this way."

"It was our pleasure," I said.

I shook Harry's hand.

"Thanks for coming, Phil. I heard you're next. Six months, right?"

"Right. Thanks for inviting me."

Phil and Harry shook hands.

"We'll see you in New York," I said.

"Definitely," Harry said.

I looked at the dance floor. Lila was spinning more quickly now, her eyes far away, smiling. The icing was gone from her chin. Maybe Harry had told her about it. After all, she was his first.

"Lila knows when you're leaving?" Harry said.

"We'll meet her in the lobby at nine."

"Once you get used to her, she's great."

"I bet she is."

I followed Harry's eyes as he looked over at Lila. She was still spinning

around but now her hands were over her ears and she was thrusting her head back and forth.

"I'll make sure she gets a wake-up call," Harry said. "So you'll meet her in the lobby at nine."

"You have my word."

"Great," Harry said. "And thanks again for coming."

He took me around and hugged me and then Phil and I left.

### *Checkered Flag*

We called downstairs and put in a wake-up call for eight. We hung up our suits and got into the queen-sized beds. Phil watched some TV. The Pacers game was almost over. I had a headache from the bourbon.

"She's a freak," I said.

"What a lonely soul," Phil said.

"She won't be lonely tomorrow. The happy groom made sure of that. What the fuck was he thinking?"

I tried to get comfortable but couldn't. The sheets felt damp and the pillow was too thick. I sat up.

"What was I thinking?" I said. "What the fuck am I doing? This is my vacation. I'm supposed to be free. Summer session starts on Wednesday. I don't need this shit."

I slammed the bedside lamp to the floor and punched the wall.

"That's sixteen hours. Eight hundred miles stuck with a lunatic. We won't be able to sleep in the car. We won't be able to joke around. We'll have to make sure she keeps her mouth shut. She'll be sneezing the whole fucking trip, her snots flying everywhere. You just don't do that to a friend."

"Maybe Harry doesn't really like you," Phil said.

"If he's so worried about Lila he should drive her back himself."

"How'd you like that dance she was doing?"

"What should we do?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Should we leave?"

"We can't."

"We can do whatever we want."

"You gave your word."

"Fuck my word," I said.

I got out of bed. I kicked the lamp across the room, put a hole in the shade. I walked to the door, opened it, looked up and down the hall. I could hear people partying in one of the rooms but couldn't see anyone.

"Fuck it," I said.

I closed the door.

"We're out of here," I said.

"Refresh my memory. What was the last thing you told Harry on the night of his wedding?"

"I don't care."

"You gave your word. He's your friend."

"Fuck it. I hardly know the guy."

Phil picked his Yankees cap off the night table, looked at it.

"You sure?" he said.

"Let's get out of here. If we leave now, we'll get to the city at a decent time tomorrow."

Phil got out of bed. We dressed quickly, packed up our clothes, put our suits in the suit bags. We checked the room to make sure we'd taken everything. I put the busted lamp back on the night table, turned the most damaged side to the wall. I opened the door and looked down the hall. I still couldn't see anyone. If we snuck out the back we wouldn't have to go through the lobby where Harry might be coming in, or Harry's wife, or Lila.

"Grab your bags," I said quietly.

"Hey, professor."

"What?"

"Your word means shit."

Phil started laughing his high-pitched laugh.

"Let's go," I said.

We picked up our bags. I shut the door behind us. We walked quickly down the hall towards the emergency exit. We slowed when we saw one of the room doors open, crouched low to the floor, but one of Harry's actor friends was right in the doorway, a drink in his hand.

"Where you guys going?" he said.

"We're splitting," I said.

"What about Lila?"

"What about her?"

"Aren't you supposed to drive her back to New York?"

"I'm supposed to do a lot of things."

The actor friend started laughing. I dropped my bags, grabbed him by the throat and put him against the wall.

“Is something funny?” I said.

Harry’s actor friend had stopped laughing. He’d stopped breathing too. I let go and he backed away a step.

“I didn’t mean anything by it,” he said.

“Good.”

“What should I tell Harry?” he said.

“Tell him we went to steal one of those golf carts.”

I picked up my bags and led the way to the emergency exit. The alarm went off but I didn’t care. We ran down eight flights of stairs, our bags slapping into the walls at every turn, and pushed the door open. Another alarm went off. We were at the side of the hotel, at the edge of the parking lot. We kept ourselves out of the light. Phil kept telling me my word meant shit but it was hard for him to get it out because he was laughing so hard. I was telling him to hurry up. We started to move quickly toward our rental car and just as quickly a car pulled in from the highway. It was a small car, making a lot of noise, a tinny noise, and then we made out the stuffed duck on top. We dove under a van, pulled our bags in next to us, and kept our heads down. I tried to catch my breath. I eased forward on my stomach. I felt my forearm slide into a puddle of oil. I eased forward some more until I had a clear view of the lot. The tinny noise stopped. The car doors opened and shut. Harry was there, and his new wife, and Lila was with them, too. And here we were, two teachers, skulking around a parking lot, hiding under a van, running away from the last words I’d given to the groom on his wedding night about the woman who’d been his maiden lay.

“We should tell them we’re leaving,” Phil said quietly. “We should tell them we just can’t deal with her. Let’s be honest about it.”

“Fuck it,” I said.

“You think they can see us?”

“I don’t care.”

We stayed under the van until they went into the hotel. Then we slid backward, picked up our bags, ran to the rental car, threw our bags on the backseat, started the car, and drove out of there. Phil was cracking up. It wasn’t until we were out of the lot that I switched the lights on. I merged onto the highway and started laughing too.

We laughed for about two straight hours on the way home. There was no

traffic and we drove at ninety miles an hour on the straight stretches pretending we were at the Indy 500 and I hit the switch to open the windows so we could feel the wind free on our faces. We pretended Lila was in the backseat, pretended to tell her to shut up, to keep her stories about Harry and about Harry's slippery dick to herself. We laughed and laughed and Phil kept telling me how my word was shit. After a while we stopped laughing and just looked ahead. We still had over six hundred miles to go. We were tired and the highway seemed to stretch forever. I pressed the switch and the windows went up.

"He should never have asked me to drive her home," I said.

"You should never have said yes."

"Shut up back there, Lila," I said. But it wasn't really funny anymore.

I set the cruise control to sixty-five and sat back. If she had been a buxom blonde, a raven-haired beauty, a striking redhead, we would have been glad to wait for morning, we would have been glad to give her a lift. Phil had to be back at work in about thirty hours. My Humanities class started on Wednesday. I'd go up to the blackboard and write down *Know Thyself* and *Nothing in Excess* and talk about the Delphic Oracle and about heroes. I always asked my students what their definition of a hero was and inevitably they talked about helping others. Playing the loving teacher I'd say that was true, that was the basis of the class, the humanity in Humanities.

"You awake?" Phil said.

"I'm up."

"I think I'm going to crash for a while."

"All in all, this trip was a bust."

"At least we saw the Speedway," Phil said.

Phil leaned back and put his cap down over his eyes. There were no cars on the road, only trucks carrying goods across America. I stayed in the left lane. I passed one truck and another and hit an empty stretch of road. I sat forward, shook my head, forced myself to stay awake. I flipped on the brights. A deer was in the middle of the highway, still intact, freshly killed. Its eyes picked up the light and I recognized that faraway look. I felt the bump and drove on.

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# BACKWARDS CITY REVIEW

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