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TURNPIKE

Paul Mandelbaum

Tom Horty has been living in my house since September. During a moment of weakness I took him in. He's filled the space left by my ex-husband. Tom Horty and I are lovers, without love.

I'm frying chicken for Tom. It's one of his favorite things, and we have it every Friday night. After I serve him, I pare the apples for tonight's pie, another ritual. Cherry will not do. Tom hates surprises. That's why, he occasionally reminds me, he's always been a stockbroker and never an investor. Carefully, I carve around a bruise. Behind me I can hear Tom licking his fingers.

"Pie's in the oven," I tell him as I grab my purse. "I'm going over to check on Doris."

"She's all right. You've gone the last two nights in a row, Lois. Why can't you just call her?"

"She is not all right!" And then, quietly, "You could come."

"I don't need to get depressed."

I'm at the door by now. I find my key ring and hold it moment, noticing its weight. It's been a long day, and I'm tired. My arms are filling with fatigue. No, they're emptying of their strength. And the space that the strength has left behind is being taken up by guilt. Glaring at Tom's back, I stab the seven digits of my sister's phone number.

"Lo-ie!" she cheers. "How are you? Coming by? You can meet B.B."

"Not tonight, Doris. It's been a hard day. I'm beat."

"That's too bad," Doris says, through the joyous crunching of some kind of chip. "B.B. says that if I'm feeling up to it, we'll go to see his property this Sunday. Want to come?"

"B.B."

"The guy I met in the hospital. Big guy. Gallstones. Nice man. Want to come?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I can't." I say this as softly as possible.

"Can't that bum take care of himself for one crummy day?"

"Please don't say that."

"Excuse me. Mr. Horthy. He's taken over your whole life."

"He just likes us to spend the weekends together," I say, even though my sister has a point.

"Suit yourself. Hey Loie, guess what? I lost another ten pounds." Doris laughs heartily. "This is the best diet I've ever been on."

"Lois," Tom Horthy calls, rattling the dice cup from the backgammon set, and I wonder why he's here, in my house.

"It was like being on a superspeed train and walking up the aisle. Everything was so smooth and effortless," he once explained, telling me why, years before, he'd walked out on his wife and children. "And I'd look out the windows as I strolled by them, and I'd think I was running at a hundred miles an hour. It scared the hell out of me."

Maybe this is why I took him in: to learn why a man leaves his wife.

Four years ago, somewhere on the turnpike, our air conditioning broke. This wouldn't have been so bad had my husband, Herb, not insisted it still worked. He made us keep the windows rolled tight. Controlled them with a master switch as he drove our rental car at 55 miles per hour.

The vacation was Herb's idea, a desperate attempt to pretend we were normal. You'd rather be doing this with someone else, I wanted to say. Who is she, I wanted to ask.

Farther south, the highway was dark and full of insects.

"Can we change this station?" I asked my husband. We were listening to an evangelical forum called "What Does It Mean to Be Happy?" The car windows were still rolled up, and I was getting woozy for air.

"No," Herb said, "We've been up and down the band. There are no good radio stations in this state. I happen to be enjoying these ministers, or whatever they're called."

"I'm not."

"Well, I'm the driver."

"Pull over and I'll drive."

"Don't give me a hard time right now," he said, tugging at his ear lobe, a nervous habit he'd enlist when he didn't want to listen. "I have a headache."

"You'd rather be on this vacation with someone else."

"Yes."

"Who?" I asked, bracing myself for the names of my friends, or the youthful and exotic name of a stranger.

"Anybody," he said.

"Pull over and let me drive!" I whispered so fiercely that I scared both of us.

As he slowed the car on the emergency shoulder, Herb began to unfasten his seat belt. It left a dark stripe of moisture across his shirt. "I'm taking a walk," he said. He ambled along the road's shoulder for a few yards. Grinding my teeth, I said nothing.

Saturday afternoons I mow the lawn, which is mostly weeds, but they need cutting, too. The exercise relaxes me. I wish I had a destination instead of walking in circles. With one-tenth of the lawn to go, Tom offers to "take a turn." I go inside and, from the kitchen window, I watch him do leg stretches. Painstakingly, he combs the patch of unmowed lawn for small twigs and other potential shrapnel. The actual mowing takes three minutes.

Pressing a handkerchief to his forehead, he enters the kitchen. "Ruined," he says and points to his new sneakers, now green with grass blood. "I've got to take a shower."

He spends the rest of the afternoon recovering, and I amuse myself preparing a leg of lamb.

Dinner, as usual, is a quiet time. It's the sounds of chewing and swallowing, of knives drawn against plates and ice cubes rattling inside their glasses, and the rumble of Tom's stomach. The stove clock hums, reminding me of the mouse that once lived inside my oven, and I feel a shiver of revulsion. The trap I'd set snapped across the mouse's leg, merely injuring him. Filled with guilt, I tossed its still breathing body into the trash.

Dinner's over. Tom's in the living room, lost in his spy thriller, and I'm staring at my kitchen counter, which is a mess. The juices on the chopping block ought to congeal in an hour or so. I resolve to leave it for tomorrow.

Standing in the doorway, I ask, "Would you like to go somewhere tonight?"

"It's too late," he says. He lifts his Rolex in my direction.

"It's only eight o'clock."

He continues to read and ignores me. When Herb used to do that it would really get under my skin. I look at the top of Tom Harty's frizzy, gray head and am surprised by its ugliness.

As I start to walk out of the room, he calls to me: "Your subscription to *Forbes* has almost run out."

"I know. I'm thinking of letting it go." I close my eyes and listen to the long silence.

Finally, he says, "I read it."

That night I dream about the highway. I dream about my husband, Herb, standing outside the stopped car, relieving himself in the weeds. The radio is still tuned to the forum, "What Does It Mean To Be Happy?" I shut it off. That makes me a little happy.

I undo my seat belt, slide behind the steering wheel and lower all the windows at once with the master switch. Herb looks at the car, quizzically. I turn the ignition key, shift into gear, and wave to him.

To my credit, I do actually hope that another car will stop soon and pick him up. But it will have to be another car. I am driving this one.

I wake to the sound of persistent honking. Looking out my window, I see a bright red pickup truck parked out front.

"Lo-ie!" calls Doris, leaning out the truck window. "Come out and play!"

I throw on shorts and a shirt and run outside.

"Come on, Loie. Come with us. We're going to see B.B.'s property. Just for a few hours." She's beaming at me. I'm very glad to see her.

"You know I can't just go off without—"

"That bum," she says.

"Say," says the large man behind the steering wheel, "why don't you bring this bum fellow along. We've room." His accent's British.

"Oh, Loie, this is B.B. B.B., Loie." Doris leans back so that B.B. and I can get a good look at each other. He's got one of those big bellies that people find jolly in older men. He seems familiar.

"Hello." He smiles at me.

"Hello," I say. "Doris, Tom's not going to want to go. He won't be back from his Sunday morning walk for another twenty minutes, and then he's going to want his eggs."

"Come without him," B.B. laughs. "Even more room then."

"Come," Doris says. Her hand wraps easily around my wrist. I'm surprised at the strength she still has. "Come come come come come." Doris, always the nicer one, now cancer-ridden and still sweeter. Imagine, then, what must be growing rampantly inside of me.

I back away from the truck slowly, then sprint into the house. I take several minutes to compose a note for Tom, tearing up two versions before I finally say, "Doris needed me for the day. Burritos and guacamole in fridge."

Doris scoots next to B.B. and I slide in beside her.

"B.B. owns a car dealership," she says cheerily as we drive off.

"Truly barbaric," he adds, laughing. "But the money is fantastic."

"I've seen your ads on TV," I say. "You wear a chicken suit, don't you?"

"C'est moi, le chicken," he says, turning down his cb radio. "Some

grown men would find it degrading to climb into such a suit.”

“It’s B.B.’s favorite part,” Doris says.

“Absolutely.”

“That’s amazing,” I say, and he smiles at me.

My sister opens a box of chocolate truffles and eats one. She picks out another, holds it up to my mouth. I open wide, and she gently places it on my tongue. The bitter cinnamon dust dissolves into a dark, rich sweetness. I remember the taste from our childhood. Doris offers to feed me another, and I let her. How cowardly of me to blame her in my note to Tom.

She plucks the cb microphone out of its holder. “Breaker, breaker,” she says. “I, Doris Carden, being of sound mind and let’s leave it at that, want to make my last wishes known here.”

I flush with embarrassment and shake my head no.

“It’s OK, Loie. All the particulars are written down. I just want to say it over the air for show. I, Doris Carden, leave everything to my dear sister, Loie, to use however she wants. Except for one item, any one item, to be selected by my friend, B.B., who has more money than he knows what to do with.”

“Any one thing?” B.B. asks.

“Any one thing.”

“Your bath soaps, that their sweet scent will remind me of you.”

Doris turns to me and, looking a little misty-eyed, says, “Do you hear that? God, sometimes this man gets to me.”

I smile and lean my head out the window and let my hair blow across my face. I’m thinking about my dream the night before, in which I’ve driven off, leaving Herb behind. In real life, of course, it didn’t happen quite that way. Herb zipped up his pants, and after returning to the car, he remained married to me a while longer.

B.B. helps Doris out of the truck cab. We’re standing on a grassy hill, two hours or so from home, overlooking a field of wild flowers. Beyond it, squares of farmland, the crisscross of country roads. Far away I can make out the steeple of a small church.

“What a gorgeous spot,” I tell him. “Are you planning to build a house?”

“No,” B.B. says. “I don’t think so. I just plan to come here when I need to walk around.” We stroll along the sloping meadow, through the sweet-scented air. To come here whenever I wanted, walk for hours, sustain myself with berries and walk some more . . .

We spread our blanket and sit. B.B. sprawls across half of it, and Doris leans her head against his chest. I unpack the picnic my sister has prepared: grape leaves, goat cheese, a wheel of dark bread,

roasted chicken stuffed with new potatoes and dill, two bottles of Zinfandel. We eat leisurely and then nap in the late afternoon sun.

When I awake, B.B. is cradling a ukulele in his large hands, strumming the chords to "My Blue Heaven." "Just Doris and me," he croons in his British baritone, "and Loie makes three. . . ."

By twilight we still haven't moved and soon the first fireflies blink. Doris and I wait for them to float near, cup them in our hands, and let them go.

I'm barely through the door before Tom says, "Lois, it's after ten. What kind of a stunt is this?"

He stands in the middle of the hallway. I brush past him and say, "If you were worried—"

"Not worried, angry. Four o'clock, four-thirty, five, dinner time rolls around, and the kitchen is a mess . . ." Tom gets a St. Pauli Girl out of the fridge, opens the right hand drawer, finds the bottle opener, and leaves it out when he's done.

The kitchen is still dirty from last night's dinner. I gaze at the pots in the sink and the soiled counter top. My eye rests on the cutting board, on the chef's knife, with its walnut handle and ten-inch, carbon-steel blade. An anniversary present from Herb.

"What are you thinking?" Tom asks, his voice suddenly dry and crusty. He's scared, I think, because it's never occurred to him, until now, just whose kitchen he's in.

