

*Joseph M. Schuster*



## LIMOUSINE

When Dale's mother was pregnant with him, she went to see a fortune teller, a ninety-year-old Irish woman who lived in a farmhouse a half hour outside of town. "It was like I was stepping into another world," Dale's mother said whenever she told the story, which was often. She did so nearly every year on his birthday, and stood up in the banquet room at the Saint Martinsville Holiday Inn to tell it at the reception for Dale's wedding, a bit unsteady, as much from her shyness at speaking in front of fifty people as from the red wine she'd had with her prime rib.

"She had no running water, if you can believe this in 1951," Dale's mother said. "And her house was floor-to-ceiling junk. Newspapers piled up and bags of old rags all over the living room. There must've been fifteen squirrel hides laid out on the sofa and a wall with more crucifixes nailed to it than I could count, maybe twenty, little ones like from a rosary, and big wooden ones.

"She took me back to her kitchen and sat me down, and then just stared at me for what seemed to be forever, five minutes maybe. Dale, honey, you were leaping to beat the band inside my belly, but she just kept staring at me."

The banquet room was quiet, except for a waitress asking in a quiet tone at one of the tables if anyone needed more coffee; even those who had heard the story before gave her rapt attention. Dale's new wife, Tina, traced and retraced the rim of her crystal water glass until it emitted a quiet whine and she stopped, dropping her hands into her lap. His father-in-law sat with his elbow on the table, his chin cupped in his hand, and Dale's father kept curling a lock of his hair around his index finger.

"Finally," Dale's mother said, "she told me to lift up my blouse. I

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felt strange but I'd paid my five dollars and was bound to see this through. She laid her ear against me and listened for a moment. What I remember is that, while she was listening to you inside me, I looked at her head. She had psoriasis, and little flakes of her skin drifted off, just like snow on my shoes. She looked at me so serious I thought she was going to tell me you were retarded or an evil child, but all she said was, 'He will approach greatness.' "

Everyone applauded when she finished the story. Dale's mother blushed as she sat back down. "I don't know why I told that," she said to Dale's father in a voice she tried to make quiet but which was loud enough for everyone to hear. Then the band started playing again, a bouncy version of George Jones's "Why Baby, Why?" Dale's mother gave a shriek of delight that made everyone at the table laugh. "Did you have them play this for me, honey bunny?" she said, laying her hand on Dale's. "Come on." She pulled until he was standing, and led him to the dance floor. "Mother of the groom prerogative."

When Dale was nine, his mother had taken him to the fortune-teller's house, but it was falling down. There'd been a fire, years earlier, and one whole side of the house had collapsed, the blackened beams scattered over the yard. In the part still standing, the windows had been broken out, and someone had ripped the screens from the enclosed porch.

As Dale and his mother sat in the car studying the house, a crow leapt from a second-story window, holding in its beak a limp mouse. Whether because it did not see them or was acting out of some desperate territoriality, it flew directly at them, so fierce and large and black that Dale and his mother both ducked instinctively, although they were safe behind the windshield. At the last moment, the crow dropped the mouse and missed them.

"I thought I was going to have a heart attack," Dale's mother said, fanning herself with her hand.

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For a long time, Dale liked to say that, while he had never done anything great, the gypsy was right, because he did approach greatness on a regular basis. "Every time I shake the hand of a celebrity I drive." It was a good joke; people laughed no matter how often he told it. Several years ago, he had Wayne Hays in his limousine. He's had a lot of other famous

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people, too. Almost every month, there is a different country singer with a date at the Wheeling Jamboree. Once, he drove Jay Black from Jay and the Americans to an oldies show at the Ohio Pumpkin Festival. But, of everyone he has driven, Wayne Hays was the one who most knew greatness.

Dale picked him up one night at 11:30 from the Columbus airport and drove him the one hundred miles to his Red Gate horse farm in Belmont, Ohio, a rich, rolling piece of property bounded by white fences that hid the barbed wire that actually kept the horses in. This was after he was out of Congress because of the blond typist who couldn't type. When the scandal hit, the TV newscasters kept calling Wayne Hays one of the most powerful men in Congress but, three years later, when he rode with Dale through the foothills of eastern Ohio, he was just another tired man going home after a tedious flight, dozing in the backseat, his head lolling on his chest. Dale wondered why Wayne Hays had no one else to pick him up from the airport, a family member or a friend, and he felt sorry to wake him when they reached the farm. As he opened the rear door, Wayne Hays started and was embarrassed that he had dozed off, but Dale pretended he hadn't noticed.

This afternoon, Dale is not driving anyone great. He's doing funeral duty, a thirty-year-old widow and her seven-year-old daughter. Dale hates funeral duty, the somberness. Today is particularly gloomy; it's cool and a light mist has been falling since before he woke up. The windshield continually fills with rain and the intermittent switch isn't working, so he has to keep turning on the wipers, but after a few strokes the glass is so dry that they squeak across it, and he has to turn them off and wait for the glass to cloud over again.

The widow, Mrs. Demarest, rides to the cemetery silently, pressed into a corner of the backseat, her hands folded neatly into the lap of her black dress, looking straight ahead. It disconcerts Dale when he peers at her in the mirror. Most people look out the window, or at least face that way, as if they're taking in the scenery, but there is a baldness to Mrs. Demarest's grief. Her daughter Kimmie sits in the opposite corner from her mother, sucking furiously on her left thumb, wrapping and unwrapping the fingers of her right hand in the hem of her deep-red velvet dress.

Mrs. Demarest's husband, a year younger than she, died when the family mini-van fell on him. Dale read about it in the paper, about how,

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despite a steady rain, he was changing the oil because it had been three thousand miles since the last change. Water streamed into the carport where he worked and when he tried to pull himself from beneath the chassis, he slipped and knocked one of the jacks loose.

It's a sad story, Dale realizes, but he wants to tell Mrs. Demarest that she'll forget her sadness, she'll grow older and so will her daughter. In six months, nine, she'll be at a bar with friends on a Saturday, laughing over a Stroh's, the nick-knock of pool balls in the background, a baseball game on the big-screen Sony. The door will open and the bar will fill with a sudden light from the afternoon sun and she'll look at the silhouette of the person entering or leaving, and it will strike her, suddenly and incongruously, that she's a widow and she has let the fact slip her mind, and it will surprise her—the fact of it and the forgetting. She'll think for a moment that she should feel sad, should go home and mourn properly, but then the person next to her will elbow her with the punchline of some joke, and after a second she'll laugh and the feeling she experienced will fly out the bar, closed up with the shutting of the door against the day.

But he won't tell her that, he thinks. He's been trying to keep in mind the lessons he's learned since he started driving a limo, talking to people, and watching them. And the A-number-one lesson he's working on is that no one can learn from someone else's anything—grief, joy, disappointment, satisfaction.

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Dale doesn't go to the grave site. He never does. He stays with the car, on warm days standing outside, smoking, talking to the hearse driver, watching the mourners from a distance. Today, he sits in the car with the heater on low, his window cracked an inch so he can hold his cigarette outside when it's not in his mouth. Tina could never understand why he'd do that on cold days. "You exhale into the car, the cigarette is in the car when you're puffing away on it, why bother to hold it outside?" she said to him almost twenty years earlier.

He told her it was just something you either understood or didn't understand.

"Like relativity," she said.

"I guess," he said.

Mr. Demarest's fresh grave is half a football field down a steep

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grassy bank, marked off by a dull yellow canopy and a wide carpet of artificial turf so bright green it reminds Dale of the plastic grass that went into his daughter's Easter basket when she was a little girl. Tomorrow, the canopy and carpet gone, it will be hard to distinguish from any of the other three hundred or so graves already here. With the new state law that prohibits raised grave markers—only flat stones allowed, so that the cemetery groundskeeper can mow more easily on his rider Murray—there'll be no sign from a distance that he's even laid there; that part of the cemetery looks little more than a rolling field with small regular indentations where the twelve-by-eighteen gravestones lie. When it snows more than a couple of inches, it all just seems an extravagant expanse of lawn surrounding the faux Gothic mausoleum built by the descendants of the man who founded the town a hundred and forty years ago.

Dale watches the small party of mourners make its way down the hill. Mrs. Demarest, in heels, takes dainty sliding steps to keep her footing, her right arm laced through that of the minister who performed the service at the Presbyterian church, her left hand holding Kimmie's. Dale thinks that the difficult going is a blessing, whether Mrs. Demarest knows it or not; as she concentrates on keeping her balance, she can't be thinking about her husband being crushed beneath their Aerostar. That's the beauty of small mindless tasks; your whole self becomes the digging up the dandelions scattered over the yard, or the infinite circles you make with the buffer on your living-room floor when you're waxing it, or the sorting the silver as you put it away after washing the dishes.

From the distance, Dale watches the tiny knot of Mrs. Demarest's family and friends shielded under the canopy from the drizzle, the puffs of breath from the minister when he speaks the prayers and the collective stream when the mourners say their responses.

It's been years since he has been to any sort of service like this. When his wife was buried and then, not long after, his mother—that must have been the last time he was in a church or anywhere close to saying a prayer, and even then he walked out of Saint Rose of Lima in the middle of Tina's funeral mass, at the offertory, as the priest started to wash his hands in the little crystal bowl the server brought him. Dale just got up from the front pew, walked down the nave, and stepped out into the street. Without knowing what he was doing, he headed down Cypress Street and then left onto Elm. At one point, he stopped in a convenience store and

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bought a pack of Winstons. As easy as that, while the priest was saying the prayers of the dead over his wife, he started smoking again. He'd quit cigarettes a decade earlier, when Tina showed him pictures of cancerous lungs and told him she'd like him to be around for awhile, but it was simple to start up again, strolling through the pleasant neighborhood that surrounded the church, lighting one after another, just a man in a gray suit taking a Thursday morning constitutional, waving to people he didn't know who were watering their lawns or delivering furniture or carrying in groceries.

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At the end of the service, the minister hugs Mrs. Demarest and the mourners begin hiking up the hill toward the drive. Mrs. Demarest hangs back and Dale can't tell if she's beside herself with grief; he hopes she doesn't explode into hysteria in the back of his car. He can't stand it when people make a scene, wailing after a funeral, fighting on the way home from an anniversary dinner, kissing on prom night.

When Mrs. Demarest gets into the car, she's solemn, but her face is dry. "Do you know where you're supposed to go?" she asks, her voice flat and distracted.

"To your house—4163 Hudson, in Forster."

Without responding, she closes her eyes, leans her head back against the seat and then as Dale pulls away from the curb, sits up long enough to put on her daughter's seat belt and her own.

It is fourteen miles to Forster, along two-lane blacktop, most of it. Mrs. Demarest and Kimmie are quiet. Mrs. Demarest seems asleep. Kimmie looks out the window, saying words under her breath. After a moment, Dale realizes she's reading the signs they pass. "John Deere," she says. "Pioneer. Slow. Stop." Dale wonders if she is old enough to understand what has happened to her father, or has her mother just told her that he has gone away on a long trip, and she'll wonder for years when he was coming back?

When Tina died, Ellen was thirteen. She understood death by then and Dale couldn't hide the bald facts from her, although he tried to. She didn't talk to him for a month after the funeral, didn't talk in school, grew pale until her English teacher called to suggest counseling. Eventually she did open up again, but Dale could tell that her mother's death had changed her; things set her off. Half a year later, she found her cat dead and went

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into such paroxysms of grief that Dale thought she was going to hurt herself, running around the house wailing, hitting herself on the head with her open palm.

And a year after that, when Dale thought she'd recovered at last, he was driving her home from a late-afternoon dance recital in Bridgeport on the Ohio River. Turning off I-70, he hit a possum crossing the road. In the dusk, Dale didn't see the animal until he was almost on it; he thought it would scurry out of the way, but the possum froze, curling into a ball smack in the middle of his lane. There was a bump as they hit it and then a thumpthumpthump as the front tires threw the body against the underside of the car. Ellen cried out and, when Dale wouldn't go back to bury it, stopped talking to him again, that time for a week. Even now, when she's a nineteen-year-old woman, with an apartment of her own and a job cleaning teeth for a dentist in Columbus half-the-state away, she goes through tires. Dale will call her, but she'll tell him in a quiet voice that she can't talk just then.

He wonders if Kimmie will react like that. He glances in the mirror, wishing he could do something for her. She's tracing her finger across the glass of the window beside her.

"Would you like a lollipop?" he asks.

She looks at her mother, who doesn't stir.

Dale opens the glove compartment, fishes out a grape Blow Pop and holds it over the back of the seat for her, half turning sideways and stretching as far as he can so she can reach it. She looks at her mother again, then takes it. Dale knows he's not supposed to talk to the mourners like this, not supposed to get involved, not supposed to offer them candy. Herb Bullock, who runs the mortuary that contracts with Dale's company, told him this once after Dale had tried talking to a man whose wife had died at twenty from lymphoma. The man was himself only twenty-three, an incomprehensibly young age to be a widower, younger even than Dale when he and Tina married. On the way from the cemetery, Dale pulled up in front of a tavern three blocks from the man's house. "It's awful what happened to you," he said, turning off the key. He intended to buy the man a beer, that was it, one beer, a small gesture for someone grieving so, but, before he could explain, the man got out of the limousine and walked home. Dale remembers the way he glanced back at him several times, shaking his head, a young man in a dark gray suit he'd clearly bought to

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bury his wife, stalking angrily into the shaded street. "Leave them alone," Bullock told Dale. "I understand you've been through something, but be invisible, just get them there and bring them back home."

Dale tries and most of the time succeeds. But with the girl, he sees too much of his own daughter in her. "Here," he says, when she has trouble tearing off the paper wrapper from the sucker. She gives it to him, he opens it and passes it back.

"Say 'thank you,'" her mother murmurs, in a voice that suggests she's not quite asleep but on her way there.

"Thank you," the girl says.

"No prob," Dale says.

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Before they have gone much farther, Mrs. Demarest has fallen asleep, snoring quietly. Dale wonders if this is the first rest she has gotten in days. When Tina died, the doctor gave Dale a prescription for Somnal, but even with the pills he had trouble, lying awake into the early morning, at first in his own room and then for three nights in the guest room and then on the sofa in the family room with the television on low for company. When he did finally fall asleep, he woke after an hour or so, disoriented in his own house, not knowing what room he was in.

Now, out of sympathy for Mrs. Demarest, Dale slows down so that it will take longer to get to her house where she'll have to wake up and face a roomful of mourners eating casserole and ham sandwiches.

It's mid-autumn, and the fields they pass have been harvested. Here and there lie bent cornstalks and stacks of hay. The drizzle has stopped, and in an orchard, workers pick a late apple crop. On a small pond, its surface green with algae, several ducks swim. Dale switches on his headlights and turns up the heater.

"It's pretty here," he says in a low voice to Kimmie, who nods. She's finished her sucker and her thumb is back in her mouth.

Just past the junction of 147 and 149, they come upon Wayne Hays's horse farm. He's been dead for seven years now but his heirs have kept up the place. Fifteen or twenty horses graze not far from the road, dapples and bays and one black horse that lifts its head as the limousine passes.

"He's saying hello," Dale says, forgetting himself for a moment. It's



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the sort of game he played with Ellen when she was little. They'd pull over and sit in the car, watching horses, or cows or sheep, and Dale would make up stories about them, about what they said to one another, about what they were saying, in Farm Language, to Ellen herself. "Why, hello, Miss Ellen. Aren't we looking mighty stunning this afternoon. And who is that squirrely gentleman accompanying you?" He wonders if Ellen remembers the game, remembers the voices he used, the whinny for the horses, the bleat of the sheep, the lazed drone of the cow, or if all that has vanished with the double grief for losing her mother and grandmother.

Just past Hays's farm, there's a turn-off for the interstate. Impulsively, Dale takes it, looking in his mirror at Mrs. Demarest. Her mouth is partly open and she breathes evenly.

"Want to see a surprise?" he whispers to Kimmie.

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Sometimes after he leaves the mourners at their homes, he'll get on the interstate and take the limousine up to 70, 75, 80, 90 miles an hour, the tape deck playing Led Zeppelin or Cream or Jimi Hendrix so loud he can't hear the engine or, if he's singing with the music, his own voice. The back windows are tinted, almost black, and so the cars he passes can't know he's driving without passengers; he imagines they think he's driving some reckless businessman late for a plane who's offered a fifty-dollar tip if he makes the flight, or a car full of high school students who rented him for a dance and who sit behind him, chanting, "Faster, faster." And he just drives like that, all the way to the Ohio River and the West Virginia border, crossing the bridge, until he comes to the hills of Wheeling, and then he turns around and goes back home.

Today, with Mrs. Demarest asleep behind him, and with Kimmie watching the landscape blow past the window, he takes it more cautiously, only occasionally drifting a little past the speed limit. The hills they pass are ablaze with autumn, the crimson sumac and sugar maple, the brown chestnut oak and bigtooth aspen, the dark-yellow mulberry and the bright-yellow birch and poplar. Culverts are clogged with spiky grasses and cat-tails. On a distant hill stands a burnt-out barn that retains half its roof, still promoting Mail Pouch tobacco.

Just as they reach the bridge into West Virginia, the sky is abruptly clear before them. A fat half-moon sits low on the horizon; it's what his

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mother called a beer-belly moon. In Dale's mirror, the sun finishes setting, a slight arc of red among the hills of eastern Ohio. Out on the river, a tug pushes a line of barges slowly westward past the Wheeling Yacht Club. Dale keeps going, through the city, into the Wheeling tunnel that cuts through the foothills, the hissing of his tires amplified, his headlights picking out details on the brick walls, graffiti, kids' names, crude spray-painted faces.

"How do you like this?" Dale asks Kimmie, looking at her in his mirror. "This is the surprise. We're driving right through the belly of a mountain. Right through it." *The mountain swallowed us*, Ellen used to say, *Gulp, gulp, gulp*. And then Dale would burp, deep and resonant, rolling down his window so it would echo back at them from the walls. He told Ellen it was the mountain belching, and the two would laugh, and laugh even harder as Tina shook her head, "Oh, you two. No manners in this family except for me."

But Kimmie doesn't respond. When oncoming headlights flood the car, Dale looks at her in the mirror. She too is asleep, bent unnaturally in half, her torso slumped to the right, her body held up only because of the shoulder harness.

As he leaves the tunnel, he wonders if he should turn back. Over the buffet at Mrs. Demarest's house, the mourners are probably muttering about her long absence, asking one another if they should eat before the potato salad goes bad, or put it in the refrigerator and wait. When Dale came home after having left Tina's funeral, her father was waiting for him on the porch, sitting on the step with his suit coat draped over his lap, smoking. As Dale came up the walk, his father-in-law flicked his cigarette into the juniper bush beside the porch, spat onto the lawn, and got up, walking past Dale without a word, until he reached his car. "Your daughter," he said. "Your daughter. Did you forget her?"

Inside, the house was quiet, Tina's family and his family and their friends all gone, the buffet cleared from the dining-room table, Ellen in her room with the door locked. When he knocked, she didn't answer. He never knew if she were sleeping.

Dale thinks again about Mrs. Demarest's probable sleeplessness in the room she shared with her husband, and remembers all the distractions that he'd never noticed before—the wrinkles in the sheets, the way the headboard would knock against the wall when he rolled onto his side, the

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*click* the numbers made when they fell into place on the old digital alarm clock, turning over the minutes—and decides the merciful thing to do is to keep driving. Ellen was this way when she was a baby and beset with colic. He and Tina would drive around and around town, making the complete loop ten, twenty, twenty-five times. Riding beside him, Tina would be asleep before their daughter and for long periods of time, Dale would think of ways to keep himself awake while Ellen whimpered and cried her shrill cry in her car bed in the backseat.

He crosses into Pennsylvania.

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A few miles in, he spies a group of deer standing in the deep grass along the shoulder. At first, only their yellow eyes shine like pricks in the darkness, but then his headlights fall on them, a half-dozen does, standing still, watching him approach. He's never seen so many together.

"Look," he exclaims to Kimmie, slowing, forgetting that he had wanted them to sleep. "Look. Another surprise." He slows the car and presses the button to lower the passenger side window. "Hello, deer," he calls to them. "Yes, this is Kimmie." In a throaty whisper meant to be the voice of a deer, he says, "Hello, Kimmie. I'm so glad you've come to visit us."

Behind him, Mrs. Demarest stirs. "What?"

"We just passed six deer," Dale says. "They were this close to the roadside. It was amazing, just amazing."

"Where are we?" she asks, her voice drowsy.

"Pennsylvania."

"Pennsylvania?" Mrs. Demarest says.

"Yes, just into it."

"What are you—? Pennsylvania?"

In his mirror, he can see Mrs. Demarest staring out of the dark window. "Pittsburgh 47," says a sign.

"You were asleep," Dale says, "and I wanted to show Kimmie the tunnel. She was so sad—"

Behind him, Dale hears the click of a seatbelt clasp. He glances over his shoulder. Mrs. Demarest has moved over beside her daughter and is hugging her, talking to her in a voice too quiet for Dale to hear.

"Crazy?" Kimmie says.

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"I'm not going to hurt you," Dale says. "Is that what you think? I would never hurt anyone."

Mrs. Demarest gives out a whimper. "Just please please take us back."

"I understand you," Dale says, pulling into the fast lane. "I've been there."

"Where? Where?" Mrs. Demarest says.

"When my wife died—"

"Please," Mrs. Demarest says.

"No, no, I want to tell you something," Dale says.

"Where are we?" Kimmie says.

"Will you please just turn around," Mrs. Demarest says. In his mirror, Dale can make out she is holding her daughter, rocking back and forth.

"Listen," he tries again. "Listen."

"I'll listen," Mrs. Demarest says. "Just take us back."

"I just want to say that you need to not blame yourself for what happened to your husband. It's only natural that you would—"

"My husband had an accident. I came home from the store and found him."

"Remind yourself of the good things you did for him. That's the way, you see." He wishes he could explain more clearly, find better words to tell Mrs. Demarest what he knows.

She leans forward, clutching his shoulder. "The way?" she whispers.

"I think your husband was probably happy when he died," Dale says. "I can see him there. He's changing the oil, he's thinking if I keep up the car, it'll last a long while. He was planning to tell you about it when you got home. 'I changed the oil on the van,' he'd say, thinking it was a sign that you were a good family, you took care of things. I can see it exactly as if I'd been there."

"You didn't know my husband," Mrs. Demarest says. Her voice is oddly flat.

"But I can see things," Dale says. "I'll bet it was Pennzoil, Quaker State, something high quality. I'll bet his garage was, you know, every tool—"

"We don't have a garage," Mrs. Demarest says.

This throws Dale for a moment. He shifts in his seat, then tries

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again. "I just don't want you to suffer," Dale says. "I don't want your daughter—"

"Then turn around."

"Before my mother died, I took her to see George Jones," Dale says. "She was happy about it, happy when she died."

"George Jones?" Kimmie says.

"She loved George Jones. She had forty-six albums. Forty-six. She'd always wanted to see him, but she never got the chance. Then, he came to Wheeling. The Jamboree." Dale laughs. "I didn't tell her we were going. It was a week before my anniversary, and Tina and I told Mom that we had to celebrate that day. That particular day. I picked her up in my old limousine, Tina and me, and I told her we were going to the Big Boy in Wheeling. When we pulled up to the concert—" Dale can see her, clapping, shaking her head, laughing, weeping. Dale was in his full chauffeur's regalia, and he got out and opened the rear door for his mother. Concert patrons murmured, peering to see who was arriving in such a manner. "It's George Jones's sister," he said in a confidential voice. "They think I'm a star," Dale's mother whispered, taking his hand as he helped her out of the car.

"That's what I'm talking about," he says now. "That's what you have to think about. Not the dying part. You have to let it go if you're going to—"

"Turn this car around," Mrs. Demarest says "Take us home." She pounds his shoulder and slaps the back of his head so hard his chauffeur's cap falls off and his head buzzes. He shakes it to clear it, and realizes that he's been going fast. He's beyond 90, almost at 100, and he's farther east than he's ever been, just passing an exit for Washington, the Shell station and McDonald's signs towering at the top of the ramp, the fields and woods giving way to the western-most suburbs.

"Right now," Mrs. Demarest says through clenched teeth.

Dale slows, wanting a place to turn around. There isn't an exit for eleven miles. "All right," he says. "It's going to be all right. It's just like a wrong turn," he says. He looks to his left for a U-turn stretch in the media. A quarter mile farther on, he spies one and starts to change lanes. A horn blows and Dale jerks the wheel back into the right-hand lane, missing the turn.

"My God," Mrs. Demarest says, gripping his shoulder.

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In another half mile, he comes to another U-turn stretch. He carefully changes lanes, slowing as he approaches it.

"It's all right," he says, almost cooing. "We're on our way home. We're as good as there."

After he pulls into the U-turn stretch, he stops, trying to calm his breathing, trying to get his bearings, and then looks to his right for oncoming cars. He's going to be conservative about the distance, wait until there's good distance between cars. A United Van Lines passes, shaking the limousine in its wake, then a mini-van, then a Yellow Trucklines semi. Finally, it's clear and Dale pulls into traffic, keeping an eye over his shoulder to make certain there's not a car he hasn't seen.

When he hits the deer, he has just moved into the right-hand lane and started to accelerate. He doesn't see it until it's a black mass darting in front of his left fender. He hits it hard, broadside, sending it spinning, head over tail, across the highway into the median strip. It causes him to veer, turning the limousine to the right and left, unsure in his panic how to maintain control. From the engine comes a mad clinkclinkclinkclink, his fan blades banging against the radiator. The car begins to buck and stall and he fights the wheel to steer it to the shoulder of the road where it hisses and dies, steam billowing from beneath the hood.

Dale shakes his head. His shoulder and chest hurt from the pressure of the seat belt tightening in the impact, and his hip is sore from where it shoved against the armrest. From behind him, Kimmie cries, a little girl's sobs like a half-formed word caught in her throat. He looks into his mirror, but at first can't see Mrs. Demarest. He thinks: She's been thrown from the car. But the doors are shut, the windows intact. He unbuckles his seatbelt, switches on the dome light and turns full around.

She's slid off the seat, her back bent unnaturally so that she half lies on the seat and half kneels in the floor well, her head lolling to one side, a dark trickle running in an arc from her forehead along both sides of her nose. Dale reaches around and touches her knee tentatively.

"Mommy," Kimmie says at last.

"She'll be fine," he says, but she still does not move. He kneels on the seat and presses his fingers into her knee hard enough to leave a mark there, two red bullets in her flesh. "Mrs. Demarest?" he says quietly, and then louder. He tries to think of her first name, shaking her shoulder.

"Momma?" Kimmie says.

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"Hush-a-bye, honey pie," Dale says. "Hush-a-bye." He reaches out to stroke her cheek, but she pulls back from him, kicking her feet. "It's OK. I'll make everything all right. Now Mrs. Demarest, you've had a nasty knock, but you're fine. Now, it's time to wake up." He tries to make his voice calm, matter-of-fact, but even he can hear the quaking in it.

"You're such a sweet little girl, nothing could ever go wrong for you," Dale says. He slides across the seat to the passenger side, and gets out of the car. An old station wagon blows by, showering Dale with dust. He opens the rear door and reaches in, putting one hand under Mrs. Demarest's neck and another under her knees, struggling to get her seated upright. It is difficult. She is heavier than he would have thought. "I'm going to help your momma," he says to Kimmie.

The cut in her forehead is not bad at all; the blood is already congealing, but the bridge of her nose is swelling. He puts his ear to her mouth to see if she is still breathing, but he is shaking so badly, he can't tell.

"You killed my mommy," the girl says.

"No, no. Your mommy's going to live a long time," Dale says. He puts his ear flush to her mouth to feel for breath. Her lips are dry and coarse. He recalls the little whimper she gave earlier and thinks he hears the sound again. Something tickles his ear, and it strikes him that the gesture is familiar, that he has done this before, checked for breath in someone to see if she were still alive.

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On the drive back from the concert, Dale, Tina and his mother sang George Jones songs all along I-70, the two women making the pssh-hhhoooo sound from "White Lightning," and Dale speaking the refrain that followed in a deep voice, all of them laughing.

"By gollyaroonie," his mother said.

"Whataroonie?" Dale said.

"You have known greatness," his mother said.

"I have?"

"George Jones's sister, right here," she said, and they all laughed.

For the first time it occurred to Dale that his mother had never mentioned what the Irish woman had prophesied for her.

"I never asked," his mother said. "I was worried about you. I wasn't worried about myself. "

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"Why were you worried about Dale?" Tina said.

"The doctor said there was something not quite right about the pregnancy," his mother said. "I was thirty-one and Dale wasn't my first pregnancy. None of the other four had made it. The doctors all thought I would never carry a child to term."

"That's so sad," Tina said. "To lose babies like that . . ."

"I don't look at it like that," Dale's mother said. "I look at it that I got one good son out of it all."

"And tickets to George Jones," Dale said.

"That's why I had you, dearie, because I knew you'd take me to George Jones one day." She and Tina giggled.

By Saint Martinsville, still twenty miles from home, his mother was asleep, and Tina felt too self-conscious to sing on her own, although Dale tried to tease her into it, calling her, "My little Dolly Parton," and trying to get her started on "She Thinks I Still Care." A little past Eldon, she fell asleep. To keep himself awake, Dale used the tricks he'd used when he was driving Ellen around as an infant, putting down his window, slapping his cheeks, rolling his head from side to side. At intermission, he'd had two beers, nothing for him back then, but it hadn't helped.

On Route 800, he woke upside-down, the bent grass and dandelions of the median strip pressing against the windshield. Tina was out of the car, dead on the roadside. His mother was in the car, still breathing, a faraway squeak in her throat that he could barely hear when he put his ear to her lips, but she died a week later. Dale had a laceration where his nose had banged against the steering wheel, but laceration was fancy talk for a small cut that didn't even need stitches.

When he came home from the hospital, he went quietly into Ellen's room and sat on the floor beside her bed. She was beginning to be self-conscious about herself, worried about pimples, and her face smelled of the Noxema she put on every night. She slept on her right side, with one fist balled beneath her chin, and Dale realized he had never noticed that before, nor that she slept with her mouth open slightly and that, although she didn't snore, every time she exhaled she let out a quiet click at the back of her throat. He watched her for some time, marveling at her stillness.

At one point Ellen startled awake and opened her eyes, wide, and she exclaimed when she saw her father sitting there.



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"It's OK, honey," Dale cooed to her. "It's all right my lovey dovey nelly belly Ellie," Even after she fell back to sleep, Dale continued to murmur like that, "Nelly Belly Kelly, Belly Belly Ellie, Ellie Ellie Nelly," thinking how he should tell her about her mother, but thinking how letting her sleep was the better course; sleeping, she was still a little girl who had a mother, still a little girl whose father hadn't drunk too many beers, enough to kill his wife and maybe his mother, still a little girl who hadn't had one part of her life closed off behind her by grief like a door shutting and locking.

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Mrs. Demarest whimpers again and Dale stands up. In the corner, Kimmie sobs quietly but she is safe, they both are safe. He steps back to the front of the car and turns on the hazard lights. For a moment there is a lull in the traffic and the flashing red taillights are the only illumination. Then Dale hears a sound. Across the road, in the median, something moves, the deer flailing, trying to stand, his instinct to get under cover perhaps stronger than his instinct to lie still and heal. Faintly, Dale can hear it thrashing, its weight pounding into the grass and hard earth over and over. He thinks: a dying deer must be a kind of portent.

But no matter how hard he concentrates, the meaning remains beyond him.

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