

Red Mustang

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Coming down off the escarpment above Collingwood, I glanced over at the old woman and down at her liver-spotted hands resting on her purse. The joints on her fingers were swollen with arthritis, and she rubbed anxiously at the clasp where the gold paint had partially worn off. Seeing me looking, she crossed her arms protectively over the handbag. She didn't trust me. That much was clear.

I remember feeling pretty good that morning as I drove up her laneway. She was waiting on me, standing on the porch looking down toward the side road as if she was expecting somebody. I grabbed my work gloves and got out.

"Come inside, Jimmy," she said from the porch and slowly led me in, pushing the inner door open with her cane.

That's when I heard the other car. "Have a seat," she said, "we need to have a little talk."

Uh-oh.

So I sat on her chesterfield with my gloves on my knee, listening to somebody getting out of their car and knocking on the door.

"I'll be right back," she said, already on her way. I turned to look and in comes that big bull cop, Palmer, with a cheesy grin on his chops.

They had me dead to rights. Laid out photos of me in Keady reselling the stuff I had stolen out of her barn. She also knew, to the penny, how much had been in the change jar she kept in the high kitchen cupboard. Set it all out like a lawyer, plain as day. Said she would lay charges unless ...

"You ought to lay charges, no matter what, ma'am," Palmer said. "We've had him in before, more times 'n I can count." He turned to me. "Ain't that right, Jimmy? Jesus, this lady here gives you a job—and there aren't many would do that with your record—an' you treat her like this here. He shook his head. "Man your age, stealing from his employer—"

"Well, be that as it may, Jimmy and I have to talk," she said, cutting him off. "I'm not yet ready to lay charges. There's some nice fresh ham in the fridge and some bread I baked yesterday. Why don't you help yourself to a sandwich?"

"You sure about this?" Palmer said. "He ought to be locked up for good—"

"I'm certain, Officer," she said, smiling at him.

Palmer shook his head at me as he passed on his way out to the kitchen. I noticed he left the door open. Eavesdropping. Typical cop.

Grace had waited, watching me rubbing my knuckles. Reform school tats, L-O-V-E on one hand and H-A-T-E on the other. I'd regretted those a week after I got them and I'd spent nearly a half century rubbing at them. I quit fidgeting when I saw her looking and laced my fingers together, chewing over what she meant by that "unless."

I am getting too old for this, I thought, kicking myself. Christ, I'm almost sixty-five and still getting caught. Shoulda got better at it, not worse.

"As I was saying," she continued, staring pointedly into my face, "unless you do as I ask I am prepared to press charges."

"What do I gotta do, kill somebody?"

"Nothing that dramatic, believe me. I just need you to drive me somewhere ... take me somewhere. Today. I'll need you the whole day."

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"What? You want me to—"

"Oh, don't look so worried! I'll pay expenses. Even see you have enough for a bus back."

"But wh—"

"I want you to drive me where I want to go. They

won't let me drive anymore," she said, staring at me through her thick bifocals. Made her eyes all big and creepy looking. "Don't think you have much choice. How many theft charges have there been now?"

"How d'you kn—"

"Oh, I know. You think I didn't look into your background before I hired you?"

"Well, why didya hire me then, if you knew?"

She paused a moment, leaning back into the stiff, wooden chair she sat in, even though there was a plush looking chair facing the big screen TV. "Because I wanted *you*, Jimmy."

"Me?"

"Yes. I have my reasons. Don't you think I could hire a teenager cheaper than an old crook like you?" She leaned forward, peering at me. "Least they wouldn't steal from me. Now, don't worry about that old wreck of yours. We'll be taking my car. I'll pay for the gas."

She sat back and waited. I didn't know what to say.

"Well, what's it to be?" she said, sipping her coffee and watching me over the rim of her cup.

I was thinking there was something a little weird about all this, but I didn't want to go back in. God knows what they would throw at me if she pressed charges. Had so many arrests on my sheet, they'd probably lock me up for good.

"If you knew ... then that's entrapment," I mumbled, all belligerent. I never have stood for people making a fool out of me.

"Oh, you do wriggle, don't you? It's a drive, you foolish man, and you don't have to break your back hoeing my garden. An easy day and the charges disappear."

"Well," I said after a moment, "if that's all I gotta do—drive you somewheres and drop you."

Take the bus back, you say? And no charges?”

She smiled at that and said, “No, I won’t ... be in a position to lay charges. Of course, you won’t be working for me anymore, but you’ll be a free man.”

She had me there.

“All right,” I said finally.

Palmer came to the door of the living room. There was a half puzzled, half angry expression on his face and half a ham sandwich with a bite out of it clutched in his meaty hand. Cops! All greedy sonsabitches. He was shaking his head at her. “No, Mrs. Clark, you oughta—”

Before he could go on, she dismissed him, saying, “I think we’re done here. Jimmy and I can handle things from now on. I will be all right.”

Palmer clearly wasn’t happy, but he left anyway. He was obedient, like her family. Might even have been a relative, for all I knew. They all did as they were told around her. People said it was because she had plenty of dough. Money talks.

We listened to the cruiser pull out. She sipped her coffee and passed it cold and half-full to me. “Put that in the sink, would you? There is a large manila envelope on the desk in the study.

We’ll need that, if you could fetch it.”

She surprised me when I returned with the envelope. Opening her purse, she drew out a set of car keys, saying she didn’t want to take the little Corolla she used to drive into town before she lost her licence. “In the drive shed out there is a car under a tarp. These are the keys. You do know how to drive a standard, I hope? Key to the shed is on the ring.”

Remember how to drive a standard? Me? Course I knew how to drive a standard. Ain’t no halfwit!

When I first went out to work at Clark’s farm, I tried getting into the drive shed, but the lock kept me out. Besides that, the doorway faced the sun-

room where she sat all afternoon, drinking herbal tea or whatever and staring out at the bird feeder by the window. I could never tell when she would be there and if she was sleeping or not behind those sunglasses she wore. So I'd tried creeping up to the shed from the rear and looked through the windows. My view of the inside was blocked by dust and some crap leaning on the glass, so I stole some stuff I thought she wouldn't miss from the barn, thinking to find a way into the shed later.

Now, using the key she gave me, I unlocked the padlock and pulled wide the two weathered doors. There was an old cement floor, stained by years of grease and solvents. The light coming in through the grimy windows lit the floating motes of dust stirred up when I opened the doors.

There was an old tarp, some kind of mottled and faded green and brown canvas thick with dust, covering the car. Looked to be a convertible underneath.

A workbench ran along the wall on the car's passenger side. There was a cobwebbed

collection of rusted tools, but also some things that were new, put there recently, with no dust on them. A new battery attached to a charger. Two large, red plastic gas containers. They were both full and smelled fresh. She had planned all of this. I glanced back at the sun-room and saw her watching me.

Pulling back the tarp, I exposed a chromed grill and red paint. Peeling it back further, careful not to drag the tarp and bugger up the finish, I found more chrome, more red paint, and red vinyl upholstered seats. As I uncovered more and more of the car, a vague feeling of familiarity crept over me. A red Mustang convertible, one of the early ones, sat gleaming under the floating sunlit dust motes. When I stood back to take it all in, I realized I was breathing heavily. I had no idea why.

With the new battery just sitting there, I figured she wanted me to install it, so I popped the hood and got to work on it, then after that I poured the gas into the tank from the plastic containers. When I was done I looked up to see she had left the sun-room and was standing on the porch with her purse, the manila envelope, and her kerchief, already tied.

As we coasted down the steep road, past the gravel pits and into Duntroon, I

wondered what was in that manila envelope and whether she had more surprises in store for me. As we came to the main corner, I saw the lights had been taken out and replaced with a stop sign. Weird.

Then I glanced to my left and noticed that the school looked newer. No doubt they had finally spent some money to brighten it up over the summer and now, in the first week of September, the playground was full of kids chasing each other around and playing ball games.

We pulled through the intersection and set off down the road toward Stayner. There was hardly any traffic on the road. *Summer's over, I thought, the kids're back in school and everybody's back at work; cottages are closing down.*

"We'll need to fill up," she said, glancing at the gauge on the dash. We'd used a lot of gas driving across Grey County. She opened her purse but then had second thoughts, and she closed it before I could see inside.

"There's a place up ahead in Stayner," I said.

"Mmmm," was all she said, and turned to stare out at the farms basking in the late summer heat. There were red patches on her cheeks and I could see a gleam of moisture on her forehead.

The kerchief she had tied under her chin to stop her hair from blowing around and to hold her sunglasses in place looked tight against the loose skin of her neck.

"Wish we had air," I said, leaning forward, shrugging my shoulders away from my sweaty t-shirt, "but it's not too bad."

"No, I don't mind the heat at my age," she said, "and I like this car with the top down. Takes me back."

An old Pontiac with metal stripes running down the hood went by. "Nice old car," I said.

"Wouldn't have minded having an old classic like that ... or like this here."

She smiled, turning to watch the Pontiac. "Well, maybe one day you

will,” she said.

Not goddamned likely.

She smiled her far-off smile and stared into the distant fields.

Yes, I certainly would have liked a car like it, once upon a time. The truth was that I could barely afford to keep my old Sunfire on the road, living hand to mouth like I did in broken down old apartments like my place above the Golden Dragon Restaurant on Owen Sound’s main drag.

Early on, before things went bad for me, I wanted to have my own garage. I worked a time or two as an odd job man in gas stations. I’d thought that I could be a mechanic, maybe even own my own service station someday. As a kid I always loved the dinging sound made when a car rolled over the rubber hose. There was a little bell inside to tell whoever was working the pump that there was a customer waiting. They don’t have those now. Now everything is self-serve.

When we pulled into the gas station on the outskirts of Stayner, there was someone

hammering at steel in the service bay. I was surprised to hear a bell ding as I drove up to the pumps. Getting out, I saw a rubber hose snaking across the garage yard. A young guy wearing grease-stained coveralls and a bandana was wiping his hands as he came towards the Mustang.

“Nice car, man,” he said.

“Yeah, belongs to the lady,” I replied. The teenager grabbed the nozzle, flicked down a metal switch, and moved to open the gas tank. The noise of a pump started up.

“What’ll it be?” the mechanic asked.

“Fill it up, please,” Mrs. Clark said before I could reply.

“Sure thing,” the mechanic said, flipping a little flange on the handle. Grabbing a squeegee, he lifted the wipers and started cleaning the windshield.

“I’ll just use your washroom, if I may?” the old woman asked, opening her door to get out.

“Sure,” the mechanic said. “Keys’re just inside the door there.”

I watched her head off to the ‘Ladies’. She had left her cane in the car.

“Nice now,” the teenager said, his mullet sticking out of the bandana, “but the heat’s building and they say it’ll storm later. Gonna have to put that top up or you’ll get wet.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, realizing I hadn’t thought of that when we set out. I wasn’t sure what kind of shape the top was in. I got back in while the kid topped up the tank.

The old woman started back to the car.

“That’ll be twenty-three,” the teenager said.

“Twenty-three!” I said, turning to look at the pump.

“I’m getting that,” she said, opening her purse and taking out an old-fashioned change purse.

I watched her pay, handing over a twenty, an old one, and one of the old brown coloured twos.

To my surprise, he accepted the money without question.

As we pulled away from the station, the Mustang rolled over the rubber hose and the bell dinged once more. “Twenty-three bucks?” I said. “That can’t be right.”

“No,” she replied, “that was about right.”

“Can’t have been, Mrs. Clark,” I said. “Must’ve been more than that.”

“Jimmy,” she said, “don’t worry about it, and for heaven’s sake, stop calling me Mrs. Clark.

You can call me Grace.”

“All right, then,” I said. “Where are we going, Grace?”

“Just keep driving. I’ll tell you when to turn.”

She didn’t speak until she told me to turn off the main highway onto a road I didn’t recognize. She said it led up across the 400 to Horseshoe Valley. I hadn’t been that way for many years. Hadn’t ever truly had what you could call a vacation, so Wasaga Beach, north of where we turned off, was as far this way as I had been in the last thirty years. Of course, as a kid I’d lived for a time in North Bay and Sudbury at a bunch of forgettable foster homes. I don’t like to think about that time.

“We’re going all the way across here to Highway 11,” she said. She seemed calmer then, not as hard as she had been when we set out—like allowing me to call her Grace—at peace somehow as we followed the long, straight two-lane through Anton Mills and Craighurst.

All around us, acres of ripening corn and grain lay warm and glowing under the early fall sun. I held my hand out to feel the wind rushing through my fingers, like warm water flowing by.

My mind went blank, lulled by the warm air and the slow rhythm of the Mustang eating up the miles. I drove automatically, guiding the convertible effortlessly up and down the rolling hills and around the lazy curves toward Highway 11.

“We’re going north,” she said at last, breaking the silence and reviving me from my stupor.

“Head toward Bracebridge.”

A mile up Highway 11 a sign said, “Weber’s Charbroiled Hamburgers and Hotdogs”.

“I feel like having a hamburger and some fries, maybe a Coke, too,” she said. “It’s been years.”

When I glanced over at her she added, “Oh, don’t worry. My treat. I dragged you into this.”

I pulled into the gravel lot and shut down the Mustang. A dust cloud settled around us. Even though it was after Labour Day, there was a line up at the burger stand. "I'll go freshen up. Wash some of this dust off me," she said.

She handed me a well-used ten, adding, "I think I would like mine with 'the works'.

Everything, and ketchup on my fries, if you don't mind."

Yeah, sure, I thought, *like ten bucks is gonna buy lunch for both of us.* However, I was surprised to find it did. Crazy, but the busy season was over. I figured they'd dropped their prices to keep people coming.

We sat under a tree at a wooden picnic table that had seen a lot of burgers and fries. She took off her kerchief and stretched her arms up toward the sun. She looked younger. I hadn't noticed before how her hair was like auburn streaked generously with grey. She looked like she felt younger, too, no longer the old woman of the morning. That scene, the farm and her confronting me, seemed ages in the past.

I watched the kid who had been inside flipping burgers come out and sit in an old Dodge hardtop. Soon the window was unrolled and rock songs came from inside it. His thin arm rested on the warm metal as he flicked ash from his cigarette out onto the gravel. The song was "Rag Doll" by the Four Seasons. *Must be a classic rock station,* I thought, staring past Grace at the rear of the Dodge. 'Polara' it said. My eyes dropped to the licence plate and I was surprised to see it said '1966' on it.

Must be some kind of antique licence.

When he finished his cigarette, the kid got out of the old Dodge and locked it. Seeing the Mustang, he wandered nonchalantly over to it and walked around it. "This yours?" he asked, looking at me.

"Naw," I replied. "Belongs to the lady." I jerked my thumb towards Grace, who just kept on chewing her burger and feeding fries into her mouth with her fingers. "I'm just her driver."

"Beautiful," the kid said. "They're gonna be classics one day. Wish I had

one.” He lit another cigarette with a match from a matchbook that he had stuffed into his pack of Rothmans.

“Already are,” I said and balled up the paper my burger had been wrapped in, tossing it at the oil drum trash can sitting under the tree. Grace had stopped chewing and was watching me.

“Yeah? That’s pretty good for something out just a few years.” He reached out and touched the chrome around the grill. “Pretty. Where you folks off to?”

“North—”

“Pritchard’s Landing,” Grace said, interrupting him. “Know the place?”

“Yeah, sure,” the kid replied. “Lot of cottagers ... from the city like, who have places on the islands. They leave their cars there. There’s a store or something there, isn’t there?”

“Yes, there is,” Grace replied. She continued watching me.

I was beginning to feel strange, as if Pritchard’s Landing ought to mean something to me. I didn’t like the feeling. Creepy-like.

“Gonna storm pretty soon,” the kid said, looking up at the clouds. Off to the west, ominous grey banks of clouds with dark edges were moving towards us. Underneath, we could see trailing draperies of rain. “Better put your top up.”

“Yes, soon,” Grace said.

“Well, see ya,” the kid said. “Gotta get back in or the boss’ll be after me. Sure do like your car.”

“Yeah, thanks, see ya,” I replied as the boy walked off. “Think he’s right. We oughta put that top up,” I said to her.

“Not yet,” she said as she stood and threw her trash away, still holding onto her Coke, “I want to ride with it down for as long as I can. Plenty of time to put it up.”

We pulled back onto the highway and set off north toward Gravenhurst and Bracebridge. I could not shake the feeling of familiarity. There was something so déjà vu about all of this. As we headed north, I eyed that threatening line of clouds off to the west and thought back to another September years and years ago.

Half a century ago.

My mother gave me up once she realized her tenth grade boyfriend wasn't going to have anything more to do with a pregnant girlfriend. Not a lot of babies were adopted in Sudbury in the fifties, so I ended up in a long succession of foster homes funded by Children's Aid. Some were okay, but most weren't. By the time I was fifteen, I'd already been caught shoplifting. The court decided I was better off placed with somebody who could 'turn my life around'. According to them I needed a 'strong guiding hand'. That ended up being Helmut Reiner, a prison guard and his piggy-eyed wife, Marthe. Helmut was away at Burwash Industrial Farm through the week, so he could only smack me around on the weekends. That job was left to Marthe on weekdays.

Stealing a candy bar brought about a call that Labour Day in 1965, which aroused the beast in both of them, and they set into smacking me around. I was almost sixteen, strong from haying for Helmut's brother-in-law and innocent enough of the shoplifting charge—a friend had actually

stolen the Oh Henry and shared it with me—that I resented it more than usual. So having had enough of it, I threatened some knocking around of my own with a broken hockey stick. Picked it up, at first just to defend myself, but when the pair of them started towards me, I swung it at them and managed to ding Marthe. They backed off, but I heard them calling the cops. I stole a duffel bag from a closet and managed to throw some underwear and a couple of t-shirts into it before jumping over the back fence and escaping down Highway 11, hitching a ride in a Coke truck heading south.

I had some vague plan of heading to Toronto. Someone at school had said that Yonge Street and Yorkville were the places to go, so I imagined I might be able to hustle something up and remain anonymous in the city. The Coke truck was only going as far as Sundridge, so they let me off there with

a free bottle of Coke. The next ride was to Burke's Falls, and after that to a gravel road that headed east into the bush, south of Bracebridge. The last guy, a plumber going in to do some work on a cottage, let me off on the highway late in the afternoon. After trying to hitch a ride for half an hour, fearful that the cops might find me at any moment out on the highway and with what looked like a storm coming in the west, I noticed a sign on the east side of the highway that said "Boat Launch". I figured there was bound to be somewhere down there to hide away, even if I had to break into a cottage for the night. I hoisted my backpack and set off away from the highway.

Ten minutes later, I walked into a broad dirt parking lot that ran down to a lake. The wind had picked up and the surface of the lake was choppy with rising waves. At the foot of the lot, where it sloped down towards the water, a dozen small boats with outboard motors bobbed in the slips that ran out from two wooden docks. The boats rubbed up against old tires put there to cushion them, making a chorus of low knocking thumps.

A grey barnboard shack sat against the forest. The roof hung out over what looked to be a window where, maybe during the height of summer somebody served ice cream and pop and candy from inside. It was closed and there was nobody around. Through the window I saw that there was nothing on the shelves. A freezer was unplugged with the top propped open. I could easily break in and spend the night inside, and it didn't look like there would be anyone turning up anytime soon. As I was thinking about the least noticeable way to break in, I saw the car, almost hidden under the trees on the far side of the lot, facing the water.

The sky was quickly turning black. There was a sudden flash off in the distance and I counted to see how far away it was. Before I had counted to nine, thunder rumbled and the first light drops of rain fell. I ran over to the car, wondering if it had been left unlocked.

Once under the tree, I could see that the car was a convertible, almost brand new, but it wasn't one I recognized. I had learned the difference between a Ford, a Plymouth, and a Chevy early on. Though the car was locked, whoever the passenger was had left the window on the far side cracked open a couple inches. I went around and slid between the car and the branches of the tree. Fitting my arm between the upper edge of the glass and

the frame of the convertible top, I reached farther in and was able to wiggle my finger under the button and pop the lock. Inside, I could smell how new it was as I opened the driver's side door. The rain started coming down harder then, the clouds boiling blackly over the lake. As I slid into the driver's seat, the wind gusts buffeted the car and the storm began throwing down small hailstones that soon changed over to torrents of rain.

I was grateful to be out of the wet, rubbing my sleeve across my forehead and looking around inside. *Beautiful*, I thought, running my hands over the dash. *Jesus, what I would've given to*

have one of these. Hell, just to have enough money to buy one of these. They must have cost four grand at least!

In those days I had modest dreams. Didn't want much, though being rich wouldn't have hurt.

I knew enough about myself to know I wanted to work with my hands. I knew I loved cars and liked taking things apart and fixing things. Books and studying didn't appeal to me, but touching something as fine as this ... well, that gave me a thrill that went deeper inside me than anything else.

But then I reached into the glove box and found a key way at the back. When I drew it out I wondered if it was a spare for the car.

Put it back, I told myself. *Not yours!*

My hand moved to the ignition and inserted the key, thinking even as I did it that I shouldn't.

I turned it and the car jerked forward and stalled.

Damn it, shoulda pushed in the clutch.

I had scared myself. Breathing heavily, I sat listening to the rain while my heartbeat stilled.

There was nobody around.

What would it hurt to try it just one more time ...

The second time, it revved into life. That car just about purred in the rain.

I thought I could drive it all the way to Toronto. But no, I'd never make it ... Just a little drive ... not far and bring I'd bring it right back. Nobody'd notice ... nobody was around.

The car moved almost on its own. The gears were easier than I had thought. Feeling more confident, I wheeled the car out of the parking lot and found the switch to turn on the lights.

Just a little ride ...

I turned out of the yard onto the side road. *You're doin' all right*, I told myself, jerking hesitantly through the gears and bringing the Mustang up to speed.

Just a little ways ...

Soon I was riding along comfortably through the rain and was even thinking about turning around.

Yeah, best take it back before I screw up.

Lightning flashed suddenly, close this time. Everything went white and the terrifying crack of thunder was so close it shook the ground. Everything flared and I was stunned. I closed my eyes. When I opened them, the rain was upon me, so much of it that the wipers weren't clearing it off. I scrabbled for the knob to turn them on full. That was a mistake.

I cursed, feeling the car tilt onto the shoulder and lean as it slid toward the shallow roadside ditch. I hit something soft and grunted as I was thrown against the steering wheel. With the breath knocked out of me, I could only gasp for air, thinking I was dying. I almost passed out listening to the sound of rain smacking hard against the Mustang's canvas roof.

When I could finally breathe, I saw that the rain had thinned enough so I could make out the ditch in the car's headlights. There was a bank of earth ahead I had ploughed into and now the car was stuck in an upward diagonal tilt.

I tried the ignition. Thankfully, it started. Shifting into reverse, I tried backing out, but either the car was too heavy or the angle was too steep. Or

maybe there was too much mud.

I'd really gone and done it now.

I turned off the engine and sat thinking for a moment, nursing the pain in my chest and listening to the rain and far-off thunder.

I took off at a run.

Somewhere in my flight down the backroad toward the highway, I realized I still had the key in my hand and hurled it away into a field.

Goddamned people, leaving their goddamned keys out where anybody can goddamned find them!

Nobody stopped to pick me up on the highway, even when they could see me, so I spent the night in the corner of an abandoned farmhouse, shivering and listening for sirens, half sheltered under a collapsed roof. But nobody came for me, and the next morning I caught a ride with a salesman. Later, south of Barrie, I found a guy driving a truckload of engine parts to Toronto.

My time on the Yonge Street strip lasted almost two months before they found me and dragged me back to North Bay.

Grace hardly spoke after we left Weber's. She just stared ahead through the windshield, occasionally leaning forward to look up into the sky. "Make the next right," she said finally.

"Thought we were going to Pritchard's Landing?" I asked as I turned onto a side road.

"Eventually," she replied, "but for now we have one other place to go. I'll tell you when to turn."

She had me make a left at the next concession and then another one. We were headed west, back toward the storm, when she spoke next. "Looks like we had better put the top up." Her voice was kind of strained and her eyes were squinting, almost shut, staring through the windshield.

“We gotta be almost there. The rain’ll hold off ’til then, don’t you think?”

“No, this won’t wait,” she said. “Pull over.”

I pulled off to the shoulder and got out.

The sky had grown progressively darker and grey clouds with black fringes marched towards us over the trees. As if to remind us of the need to get under shelter, the clouds lit up with chain lightning. The thunder rolled over us as I unbuttoned the cover and flipped the latch to free the top. It popped up on its metal frame.

Grace sat silently, staring off into the distance as I drew the canvas top up over the Mustang.

“Just reach up and snap it in,” I called to her through the rising sound. A wall of wind and rain was racing towards us across the fields. A rushing wave, it tossed the grain and shook the maples lining the road.

Grace did nothing.

“Dammit!” I cursed, still holding the top with one arm as I struggled into the driver’s seat.

“You’re not even gonna help one little bit?”

She just stared fixedly at the rain, so I reached up and started snapping the top in place.

“You better roll up your window or you’re gonna get w—” I began, but she opened the car door and was out before I knew it.

“Stop! It’s too wet!” I called out, but she was gone. The rain was falling in earnest, pattering against the top like thrown gravel. Water streamed down the windshield. Suddenly the lightning struck again, closer this time, and in the flare of light I saw her struggling against the wind, her dress flying around her as she ran away down the road.

“Jesus, you crazy, goddamned ...” I cursed as I put the car into gear and started off to follow her. Had she suddenly gone off her head? This was dangerously

crazy, out in this kind of weather. “Dammit!” I cursed again as I leaned forward, squinting through the driving rain. I sure as hell didn’t want to run her over, so I kept the car in second gear. Five minutes later, I realized she must have left the road.

What was I supposed to do? People would blame me if anything happened to the crazy old bird. But suddenly, it was there. The sign. A small one, weather-beaten with paint flaking off.

‘Boat Launch,’ it said, with an arrow pointing to the right. A dirt parking lot sloped down to a lake. I couldn’t believe it. This was the place where I stole that car.

Jesus, it was all coming back. Even the shed was there. I thought it would have fallen down in all those years since or at least been replaced by something bigger, better. With a kind of resignation, I parked the car under the trees facing the lake and stared grim-faced through the rain.

I turned off the ignition, not sure what to do next. Why would Grace bring me here and run off like that? Where the hell was she?

As I sat there, I went over all of it: the running away, the hitchhiking, the landing here, and the car, but I could not think of what was happening to me. I rubbed my hand over my face and felt strange. Reaching over, I turned the rear-view mirror towards me. As I did, there was a brief flash of lightning and I thought I saw ...

My hand scrabbled for the interior light switch and I flicked it on. The face of my fifteen-year-old self, thin with cheekbones speckled with acne, stared back at me. I looked down at my hands. The tats were gone, no LOVE or HATE in ragged blue, just young, soft fingers unworn by time and hard living.

“Jesus!” I said aloud. “What’s going on here?”

Even my voice was younger. I stared at myself in the mirror, running my hands over the unwrinkled skin and the downy growth of hair on my upper lip. And then I laughed. I was young again, and my life—my whole life—was before me. And I was sitting in the car once more with the storm beating around me. I was reliving everything that had happened that night. And I sat there in the driver’s seat, smelling that new car smell. I laughed out loud.

The lightning flashed. I reached toward the glove compartment and felt around inside. The key was there. I pulled it out and held it wrapped in my hand. And there I sat.

Just a little ride ... echoed in my head.

Just a little ways ...

Then with the key resting warmly in my palm, as the lightning flashed and thunder cracked loudly over the wind-whipped waves out on the lake, an old memory sprang forward from some other part of my mind, long set aside. From a deep, secretive corner where I had stuffed memories from darker times.

I was sitting at a table, one of those cheap, arborite veneer rectangular ones they have in cop interrogation rooms. There was nothing on the walls but a mirror meant to hide a one-way viewing room, and I knew someone was probably watching from behind it. The chair felt hard under me. The light was too bright.

A cop sat across from me—a cop with greased back hair who smelled of Brylcreem. “Sit up!” he barked at me. Someone sat beside me, a younger guy with a chinless face, some lawyer they’d given me. He whispered to me.

“Jimmy,” he said, “they think you have something to do with stealing a car a few months back.”

“Don’t know why,” the cop said, “maybe it’s the way you are just too cocky, but I believe you were down near Pritchard’s that day. I think you stole that car and if I can ever prove it, I’ll hang it on you, you little prick.”

“If you’re not gonna charge me then fuck off!” I yelled at him. Yonge Street had changed me, toughened me up. By then cops didn’t phase me. He glared at me and I stared right back at him. Deny. Deny. Deny.

And afterwards, after the anger, after the lying, my face hot and flushed, the two of them were out in the hallway. Through the noise of the station, I could hear only small snatches of what they were saying.

“ ... little bastard was there. I’m sure he’s ...”

“He says no and you have no proof, so ...”

“... manslaughter charges ...”

“Manslaughter?” The lawyer’s voice was louder then. “With what proof, huh?”

“ ... they hadn’t screwed up the evidence in Bracebridge. Jesus, Tom, that little bugger’s gonna walk away free ...”

And then I heard a sound from behind the mirror. Crying. Someone was watching me and crying. I stood up and looked into the mirror, trying to see beyond it. It was as if we were staring at each other and, though I couldn’t see them, whoever was there could see me. I went over to the switch and turned off the light, but when I returned to the mirror and put my face up close to it, I could still see only movement and a door opening to a lit hallway. Standing silhouetted against the light was a girl, a young woman with red hair, and as she rushed into the hallway, before the door closed, she glanced back at me and I saw her tear-streaked face.

Over the next few decades, when I was drunk or stoned out, that memory would come back to me, as if some part of me knew it was somehow important.

Sitting in the Mustang, I realized what I had done. I hadn’t meant to hurt anyone, but I had. I had only meant to escape, but I hadn’t. Instead I had trapped myself in a life I would never have wanted.

I began crying. For absolutely no reason I started blubbering like a baby. Just sat with the key in my hand bawling my eyes out. And when I was finished I put the key back. As I let go of it, this wash of relief, like warm rain, descended on me. I looked into the rearview mirror at my young, unlined face and saw that the past could really be changed. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve and grabbed my duffel bag. I didn’t want to be in the car and I knew somehow that my not taking it was important to more than just me.

It was raining like a son of a bitch, so I ran over to the shack. Under the projecting eave of the stand, there was a dry spot. I squatted there cold, tired, and wet, but I knew somehow I had to wait there.

I was shivering, cursing myself for being stupid, when I heard her. Out there,

out on the lake, a woman was calling out. “Help,” she yelled, “help me, please!” Feeling then that I knew why all of this had happened, I left my backpack and ran out onto the dock. I reached the end and could just barely make her out. There, in a boat, a woman was using a paddle in a frantic attempt to make it to the dock. There was an outboard motor but it had obviously become useless, that or she was incapable of starting it. She was losing to the storm; it was pushing her farther out into the lake and the darkness.

I looked around for something, anything to use to help her. There was a small rowboat tied up to one of the slips. I found oars hidden under the canvas of a nearby motorboat and jumped into the rowboat, attaching the oars to the oarlocks. Then I had another thought. I hopped out and ran back up to the Mustang, leaned in and grabbed the key. Sticking it into the ignition, I turned

on the headlights and set the beam on high before running back to the dock. It was easier to see her out there then.

Ten minutes later, I pulled the rowboat alongside her, the rain still pelting down furiously.

“Please help me,” she cried, “I ran out of gas. I’ve got to get my husband to the hospital. He’s bleeding badly!” I looked closer and could see she was standing over an unconscious man huddled against a seat in the bottom of the boat.

“Come up to the front,” I called over the rain. “Toss me that rope and I’ll tie it off and row us in.”

She came forward, tossed over the bow rope, and then returned to the guy huddled on the floor of the boat. I set off, pulling as hard as I could against the current and the waves. It took a while to get us back on course towards the dock, but gradually we drew closer. All the way in I was glancing over my shoulder at the lights of the red Mustang, using it as a guide to see where I was going.

As we drew closer the lights shone on her and I saw what I somehow knew I would see.

Squinting past me, blinking the rain away from her eyes, was a twenty-something-year-old Grace, with the most determined look in her eyes. Her bright auburn hair was pasted to her forehead, but I recognized her as the girl from behind the mirror.

At the dock, she handed me her keys and said, "Could you please go up there and find our car? It's a red sports car, a Mustang. Here are the keys ... Please bring it back down closer and help me get him out and into it. He's lost a lot of blood. I put a tourniquet ... you know, like they tell you to do ... but the cut's deep ... and, and ..."

"Don't worry," I said, "you take care of him. I'll get the car."

He was a big guy, so we struggled getting him out of the rocking boat and up the dock and into the passenger seat. He slumped there against the door and she went around to the driver's side. The Mustang's engine idled in the rain. When she saw I was hanging back she said, "Come with me, please. I'll get in the back. If you could drive, please, it would be ..."

"Yeah, yeah, sure," I said, coming around and helping her in. I got into the driver's seat.

She had slid over in the back seat so she could reach out to her husband. "Just turn right and go out to the highway and then turn north towards Bracebridge. Hurry, please."

I was having a hard time thinking about Grace being this young and me being this young and how everything was so different from how I knew it had turned out. I drove through the rain and she didn't ask me my name or how old I was or whether I even had a licence or how I had turned on the lights of the Mustang before I even had the keys. She just kept stroking the head of this unconscious man, murmuring about him not dying and how we would soon be there.

I pulled up to the emergency door and raced in to get someone. When they had rushed him into the back, I stood there alone, not sure what to do next. I went into the men's and did my best to dry off. That's when I remembered I had left my duffel back at the landing. I went out into the waiting room and there she was, anxiously staring down the hall and pacing back and forth.

“What’s your name?” she said, looking relieved as she came up to me.

“Jimmy,” I said. “Jimmy Spaulding.”

“Grace,” she said, holding out her hand to me. “Grace ... Grace Adler. Sorry, still not used to my married name. It’s only been a week and I’m still getting used to it.”

Not Clark, then? Adler?

“I can’t thank you enough,” she said. “I don’t know what I would have done if ... if ...”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“I hope you don’t mind me asking but ...would you wait here with me until they ... until he comes out?”

“Sure,” I said.

She had no money with her and I explained how I had none either because all I had was in my duffel back at the landing, but the nurses gave us coffee, so we sat and talked for a while.

She said her husband had sliced open an artery cutting wood at a cabin the two of them had rented down the lake from Pritchard’s Landing. “It was such a stupid accident,” she said. “Ran out of gas. It could have been so bad if you hadn’t been there.” We both stared at our cups and she started crying and talking, babbling to me, some stranger, like she had to tell someone how she had ended up there.

Her family had been against the marriage, she said, so they had married at City Hall. They didn’t want her marrying a Jew, no matter how promising Martin’s legal career was becoming, so the two of them had eloped, had done it on their own and gone off to the cabin for a honeymoon. Martin wanted to look into maybe buying one in the area. “Awful thing to have happen on a honeymoon, don’t you think?” she said, sniffing back tears and wiping her nose with a balled-up Kleenex. She was a beautiful woman, even with wet hair, running makeup, and blotchy skin.

“And how about you?” she said, sipping her coffee. “What’s your story, Jimmy? What were you doing out there?”

I was saved from lying by the nurse coming to take her in to see him, but she turned to me and said, “Don’t you go away now. I want to properly thank you. I can at least see that we get your belongings back to you.”

So I waited. She was in there a long time. Later, a cop showed up and asked the nurse on duty about the report of a man being brought in bleeding. I turned away and faced the wall as he went by. When he was past me I got up and headed out the door. That’s when his partner, waiting outside, collared me.

“Where d’you think you’re going, eh?” he said. “Been looking for you.”

I matched the description they had received earlier of a juvenile wanted for assault up in North Bay.

Fifty years later, Martin Adler’s funeral was a large affair held at a crazy expensive mansion-like funeral home in downtown Toronto. Sandra and I had to book the cheapest room we could find at the Sheraton. Parking our Civic cost what a meal would go for in a good restaurant in Owen Sound. Couldn’t help feeling like the poor relations among the crowd of financiers and lawyers who milled around after the funeral on the back lawn at the Adlers’ big place in Rosedale. Grace had been insistent, however, so we hung around the edge and sampled the sandwiches and squares, drank our beer and watched the Adler grandchildren skylark around the pool, smiling at them and thinking of our own grandkids.

I was running out of ways to explain who I was and how I was connected to Martin and Grace. I mostly stuck with, “I’m his mechanic. Take care of his cars.” Once I did, most of them would excuse themselves after a moment of politeness to go talk to people who had more money and better, more lucrative jobs than mine. Some of them stayed longer and talked cars while Sandra stood with her arm hooked in mine. I was glad she was there. Toronto always felt strange after spending most of our lives in Owen Sound raising our three kids and running the garage.

We didn’t get away a lot.

Then Grace appeared. There was no shyness there. She threw her arms around me and then Sandra, saying, “Thank you so much for coming. I know it must be a trial coming all this way, but Martin and I talked about you in his last few weeks. He asked me to make sure you came.”

“He even planned out the visitors to his own funeral?” Sandy said.

“Well, you know my Martin. Always was one for ...” Her voice cracked slightly, and she broke down then. I took her in my arms.

“Oh, James it’s going to be hard,” she said finally, wiping her eyes with what I saw was one of Martin’s monogrammed hankies. “I don’t know what I’ll do without him.”

“If there’s ever anything we can do ...” I said, realizing as I said it that the words were what everybody said, but I also knew I genuinely meant it.

“It’s good of you to say so,” she replied, smiling through the tears. “And I intend to hold you to it.”

She had already said she intended to move to the farm they owned in the country outside of Chatsworth, just south of Owen Sound. The house in Toronto was too big. “I’m selling it and settling at the farm. That and the cottage will be enough for me ... the kids have their own places now. You’ll visit me, I hope.”

“We always have, haven’t we?” Sandra said, touching her arm. The two women smiled at each other and I was happy that Grace had liked Sandy from the start, when I announced to her and Martin that I had met a girl I wanted to marry. That was nearly forty years and three kids ago.

I had always thought of myself as part son, part family friend, part general gofer, and part handyman to the Adlers. After that first stormy night at Pritchard’s Landing, our lives had intersected in so many ways.

I hadn’t expected to see them after I was arrested at the hospital in Bracebridge, and I was surprised when the two of them showed up at juvey court, Martin limping in and Grace following after with his briefcase and my duffel. He asked to meet with me—his ‘client’, he called me in front of the judge—in order to

represent my interests.

The judge and the cops and Helmut and Marthe had been surprised by that, but Martin had spoken briefly with the judge, explaining who he was, and then, when we three were alone, he started questioning me.

“Why did you threaten them?” he asked.

“Got tired of bein’ knocked around,” I said, frowning at the directness of his questions.

“They’re not allowed to do that, you know, that’s abuse,” he replied. “Tell me, Jimmy, they ever make you work for them?”

I described working at Marthe’s brother’s farm.

“They pay you?” he asked.

On hearing I worked for free he glanced at Grace, nodded and said, “Okay, let me see what I can do.”

He made short work of my foster parents. I found out that day that smacking around foster kids and using them for free labour was frowned upon by the Children’s Aid. The judge said he intended to place me with another couple and confronted the Reiners, asking if they still wanted to charge me, because if they did, he was sure Mr. Adler would be filing abuse charges. Helmut fumed silently, casting vicious looks my way. At least Marthe had the decency to act all sheepish. The court case disappeared as fast as the Reiners left the courtroom.

Grace and Martin asked the judge for temporary custody and arranged for the Children’s Aid to find foster parents in Toronto. I wasn’t surprised when it turned out to be them. Somewhere during those happy months they were the ones I told of my dream to work as a mechanic.

Without a second thought they found a good technical high school down there and then a community college and an apprenticeship. I lived in their place until I moved out on my own.

Later, when I met Sandra, she wanted to be close to her parents in Owen

Sound, so I found a garage that was up for sale; we got married and made a go of it. The Adlers' huge wedding cheque paid for most of the buy-in on the business and Martin did the legal work then just as he did for our wills and mortgages and everything else. Both our families had kids and we laughed and celebrated holidays together, visited the cottage in summer, and gave each other presents.

This bounty all grew from a decision I was allowed to remake on a stormy night fifty years ago, and I never had occasion to ask Grace how much she remembered of her other life until just last week.

"James, I wonder if you can come and help me with something next week," she said one day over the phone. I was never 'Jimmy' to her. She always called me James. "Are you busy Thursday afternoon?"

"Well ..." I hesitated. "I guess I can leave the garage for a day. Hardy and my apprentice can handle it while I'm gone. What do you need?"

"I wonder if you might be able to meet me at the farm. One o'clock, say?"

"Yeah, I can make it by one. What's up?"

She hesitated, I guess fearing I might not want to come. "It's just that Martin wanted his ashes spread at the cottage. I want you to be with me, that's if Sandra will lend you to me for the afternoon. I know it's illegal. Goodness me, a lawyer's wife committing a crime!" She giggled.

"Of course," I replied instantly. "I'll pick you up."

"Thank you."

"Just you and me, then?"

"And Martin," she said.

When I pulled in, she was waiting on the porch, holding her maroon purse with the worn clasp and her grey hair in a ponytail.

"All set to go?" I asked brightly.

“Just about,” she replied and walked by my car out to the shed. She unlocked the doors and I helped her push them aside and pull off the tarp, knowing exactly what she had in mind. The red Mustang sat gleaming in the light streaming in through the doors.

“Looks great, doesn’t she?” I said.

“Sure does. You two have kept her going for over fifty years. Did you realize it had been that long?”

“Martin loved this car. Told me he was never getting rid of her. They’ll have to pry it out of my dead hands, he said!” Immediately I realized how hurtful that might have sounded. “I-I’m sorry, Grace, I ... that was thoughtless of me.”

“Oh, don’t worry. I know what you meant,” she said, setting aside my apology. “But there was a truth in it all the same.”

“What do you mean?”

She smiled that faraway smile. There were tears in her eyes and she blinked them away before turning to me. “It’s not in his will. All that we are going to do today, I mean. It was his private wish to have his ashes scattered at the cottage at Pritchard’s Landing and that you and I

be the ones to do it. Don’t worry. You know Martin. Covered his tracks well as far as the legal side of things go. They think he’s in the cemetery in Mount Pleasant.”

“Well, after all he has done for me, I don’t care if it’s legal or not.”

“He loved you like a son. I hope you know that, James.”

“Yeah,” I said, the word almost strangling in my throat. I could feel tears welling in my eyes.

Working on the car had brought Martin and I together. Over the years, we’d spent a lot of Saturdays on the red Mustang. It had been my secret penance for the crime I had committed in my ‘other life’ and my own way of thanking him.

She went around and opened the passenger door. Getting in, she said, "Time to go."

I got in and she reached into her purse, but she paused as if sensing I'd chosen that moment to ask her. "Grace, did you ever think what our lives might have been if we hadn't met that night at the landing?"

She paused, a glimmer of her smile playing at the corner of her lips. "Of course I have," she began. "Things would have been very different. I've had dreams where he didn't survive and you weren't there. Nightmares, really. I ended up a bitter and miserable old woman."

"What about me?" I wanted to know.

"You?" She chuckled. "Well, I don't know, but somehow I knew things might not have

turned out so well."

I glanced down at my hands, turning them over to see the knuckles, thinking I might find LOVE and HATE roughly scratched into them with reform school ink, but saw only blank wrinkled skin.

"These are yours now," she said, handing me the keys. "The ownership is signed over to you.

It's in the glove compartment. Martin wanted you to have her. So when we come back, you keep her. Be sure to take good care of her. I'll want a ride every now and then, of course."

When I drove out of the shed I stopped and got out to close the doors. Turning back to the Mustang, for just the most fleeting of moments, I saw a young, beautiful woman with brilliant auburn hair sitting in the passenger seat, but then the vision was gone, dissolved away into nothing.

We drove down her laneway and turned the Mustang east towards Pritchard's Landing.