

TRIO

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She steadied it to sixty-five—wiped her fingers, greasy from salami slices and Cheezits, adjusted the radio to a station that didn't fuzz so much, reached for another cigarette—when she realized that the car ahead of her and the car behind her must be going exactly the same speed she was going. A couple of miles back—just after the bridge crossing over the dry river bed, when she had accelerated to pass the semi with the spanking new tire guards—the driver ahead had done the same. And the driver behind was just gliding back into their lane as she glanced into the rearview mirror. They were all travelling at the same speed. They were all traveling in the same direction. How long, she wondered, had this been going on?

She could have gone faster if she'd wanted to. Left them all in the dust. There's horses under this hood, Tom had told her. Horses under the hood, and he had shut it, patted it, a good buy, that car. They'd driven it around to celebrate. Boxes of chicken in the late afternoon up where the leaves changed color—it seemed almost from longing—to ruddy, florid red, waxy yellow, in the afternoon that had been spacious and warm on the spot in the meadow that was yellowed, maybe neglected, maybe eaten away by horses.

Her hand went up to the rear-view mirror, fluffed her bangs, wiped around her lipstick. Really, she was searching for a face in the car behind. A woman, a little older than she maybe, trailed her in some late-model economy car. Was there a baby seat in the back with a baby in it? She saw two hands gripping the wheel at ten and four—one couldn't be too careful. Baby on board. Maybe this woman leaned forward slightly, as if straining to be the slightest bit more prepared for anything unusual or potentially fatal—a chuckhole or narrow

shoulder, a sudden swerve. Was she coming nearer, the woman with the smooth brown forehead and squinting eyes? Maybe the baby had burped up a little something and she needed to pull over quickly. Maybe it was shrieking. And ahead—a gentleman ahead of her—began to creep slowly forward, away. She pressed down then eased her foot until she was safely between the two again.

Nothing much coming through on the radio—a blur of voices on the AM like everyone's secret thoughts coming to sound. She switched it off. Now there was only the drone of the engine, the thrum of the tires playing the ridges in the freeway. She chewed her candied orange slices, sipped juice from the little waxed box. Every few minutes she checked her mirrors for cops and her eyes made the rounds to the gauges—oil okay, radiator okay, gas okay, sixty-five. Okay.

It was like traveling with Tom, except she kept stiffer shoulders. With Tom maybe she relaxed too much. If at night he dozed beside her as they made their way, say, on a two-lane highway out in the desert, she sometimes sped past blinding headlights looking them straight on, for it was only a moment, wasn't it, before the rushing white lines in the dark again. Other times, she didn't dare, for what was daring when every ounce of faith you possessed was entrusted to the person on the other side of the line? And this wasn't like zipping to work or to the laundromat or to the Chinese take-out. Not even like driving to her mother's a few miles out of town. This was different. This was traveling. This—there were horses under the hood, there was gas in the tank—was a significant distance.

She had risen early, had written something about having to help her mother put up the last of the peaches, had gotten into the car and driven to the station, where a shy teenager with hair curiously beginning to gray checked her oil and water, wiped her windshield, though she hadn't gone anywhere yet, took her card, had her sign at the X. They chatted about the benefits of full-serve versus self-serve, and then she was off. Soon she was sweeping past corn, wheat, cotton fields. By fruit and vegetable stands in little towns with little stores—Buy and Fly, Zip and Go, Fastrip, Buy and Split. Workers bent, motionless, in the tidy rows whipping past, like dizzying tunnels when you looked them straight on. Far off from the road stood silos painted slate, buff, pink, green. Billboards bearing golden arches, sleepwalking bears, names of pesticides to nestle over the fields. And flicking past almost at her elbow, the little signs like grave markers—road twenty, road twenty-one, road twenty-two and a half.

An arm went up to the rearview mirror in the car ahead, the gentleman's arm in a white sleeve rolled to the elbow. Was he curious about the driver behind—curious about her? Had he noticed what she had noticed—that they were all traveling at the same speed in the same direction? But—no—he accelerated, just as she thought, as though he

wanted no part. He was the type who had to go faster than everyone else, impatient at having to follow. No, wait, that wasn't it. He'd only been getting ready to pass. And she, going sixty-five, and the woman with the baby behind her going sixty-five, were going to pass as well. One, then two, then three, past the old Mexican couple in the dusty blue pick-up with the two scrawny dogs in back who couldn't find a foothold, past the enormous U-Haul with the two guys drinking Cokes and dangling their arms out the windows—she knew the feeling, the wind's weight like a great pillow pressing your cupped hand. The sharp-looking pair in something sleek and black and aerodynamic, going slowly just because it must be possible to enjoy the potential of a machine like that without having to push it to its limit—just knowing and not having to demonstrate what it could do. So the three of them passed, the gentleman in his tan mid-sized sedan, the mother and child in the economy car, she in her good buy with the horses under the hood.

Three of them—what could she call this trio? It was impossible that the others didn't see it as well. Nothing like this had ever happened when it was she and Tom, when they were on the freeway, she and Tom, just the two of them, warm, comfy, close on the bench seat. An easy number, two—a common number—but one from which could come such possibilities, things so uncontainable they couldn't be told, like that feeling, safe and close as skin, that joined the two of them just like it was supposed to, that was so alarming, like the joy in their motion was sometimes alarming, in their rhythm, easy, slow, and her waiting for the stillness after motion, the joy in that. No one to blame but herself. He could handle it, contain it. Did he notice it, accept it? Impossible—wasn't it—that he had not felt it, too.

Not like this trio, which extended her, a widening, a fragile encompassing that took in more than the front seat, a shared thermos of coffee, the view of the mountains looming bruised and violet at the valley's edge. More than, different than, coming nearer to mountains like that at dusk, coming nearer until they were taken up, couldn't watch themselves enter them and so forgetting them as they climbed into the high, the dark, in a car warm from the heater, the radio fuzzing, Tom's hand coming out, touching her knee, lightly.

A flash. Sun striking the chrome of a minivan negotiating an on-ramp ahead. Swished in directly behind her, cutting off the mother and child. Minutes ago, she might have welcomed this family as naturally as she had the others, but they hadn't been there from the beginning, whenever it was, anyway, that she had noticed that they were together, they were a trio on the road. A road trio. But the dad, the mom, the kids in the picture window seats, the skis on top and bicycles strapped to the back, the plastic hand bobbing out the back window—their being there, cutting off the mother and child—felt

intrusive. Would the mother drop back, content to go solo, or would she speed up, catch up, regain her position bringing up the rear?

Probably the gentleman up front had noticed the same. She was sure he'd searched in his rearview mirror, that he had slowed in order to keep their trio together. She slowed as well, smiling a little to herself at their unspoken cooperation. In the mirror, she watched the minivan family. A confusion of small arms lashing small bodies with pillows. She veered back into her lane. Now a mother twisting round, raising her finger, shaking the finger. Her eyes returned to the road. Now the dad, coffee cup held high with one hand, away from the commotion, steered with the other. She readjusted the mirror and sat up straight, working her neck around in half circles. Well. This would change everything.

Pleasegopleasegopleasegopleasegopleasegoplease? She'd willed many events into occurrence, though always only minor ones. Especially on the road. She knew what other drivers were going to do before they knew it themselves—knew when they were going to change lanes, speed up at a yellow, pass, slow—without any sort of effort or concentration. Psychic driving. In her mirror, the minivan approached very close behind, tailed her, really, but then the right blinker flashed and they sailed off at the next exit with a sign for fast food, a playland, an air-conditioned retail outlet mall. There. So much the better.

All in all, she was more certain about the woman—certain that she was really a part of this even though she had fallen back through no fault of her own, had caught up and regained her position at sixty-five. The gentleman in the sedan, however, was more troublesome. He stayed up front. When he passed, they passed, scooting up behind a slow-moving car or truck in their lane, signaling, going. Always, as she began to pass, she worried that he might speed away, bored with this silly coincidence. But then she regretted not having trusted him, because he was always there as she moved back into the lane. It was something like gratitude she felt when the three of them resumed their steady, comfortable speed. Sixty-five miles-per-hour, miles-per-hour, like the ta-da-da of a waltz with its 3/4 time. How many miles—dare she hope hours?—would they move along together? When would the stillness after motion, so reminiscent of motion, come?

Sometimes she glanced, suddenly alarmed, at the gas gauge. There was plenty yet, but having to stop for gas, having to pee, having to call, for she would have to call him, made it finite—not even finite—fleeting. What have you done, one of them would say—Tom would say, or she might say to herself if it came to that. And what if one of the others, the mother and her baby or the gentleman were to sail off the exit ramp, stop for a sandwich and coffee, fill the tank, end

it, forget it. Is that all then, was what she would say if it came to that. She couldn't see it ending so simply, so suddenly. But suppose the woman lived in one of the little valley towns they passed, that she was near to home, a husband waiting, minutes away from a quiet street and a room where she would enter and lay her child down to rest?

Ridiculous. Not everything was right with her. How could she think—ridiculous!—that their trio was anything but chance? Neither of the others had noticed a thing. Just another driver on the freeway—keep your distance, maintain a consistent speed, be aware of any sudden changes. The gentleman probably thought of nothing but returning to his wife, of a business deal recently closed, or of being on his way to close one, or of being on his way to a mistress. He had more to think about than this mere accident that two other drivers were traveling at the same speed, in the same direction.

Oh, Tom, look at me, she thought. Look at me. She nearly said it aloud. Who would think I had no place to go? Not you, Tom. That I am only driving, moving, not sure when to stop moving, that I am not traveling in the same direction you are. I reach for another cigarette. I drink hot coffee and eat the things we eat when we are traveling together. No one to blame but myself. If only I could contain it, maintain it, like the light and space around us that day on the spot of yellow in the meadow, contain the richness and possibility that pair of horses had as they chased one another around and around and finally stopped together near the creaking fence. Without it only becoming a heaviness in me, only the underside of a feeling that could take me up, send me. Look, say we're somewhere dark—a room, a car, a forest. I know you then only through the movement of hands and limbs, or wheels, or the river rushing not far off that we'll walk down to in the morning. What is that but faith in the darkness? What is it but my joy? Tell me how you handle it, I need to know

She saw mountains, finally, steeped in haze. She felt she should have something decided before she got that far.

Then the gentleman ahead began to slow, trying to retrieve something from his jacket hanging in the window. She approached, realizing she would be embarrassed to slow for him. That would spell it out—I'm with you, I'll wait—that would be silly. Who was she to wait for a stranger. Maybe everything was not right with her, Maybe it was her fancy that these strangers recognized some unspoken protocol of the road. Anybody with somewhere to go would pass to maintain his speed, pass just like the three of them had passed others. She so prepared to pass and thought as she moved out, I won't look. Should I look? No, she wouldn't, and she worried that not doing so would seem more of an acknowledgement of the gentleman than a casual glance his way.

She went up ahead, what choice did she have? Up front she felt free. Oh, this was much better than following—a wide, clear view of fields, mountains, unburdened sky. She could see where she was going, even if she didn't know, really where she was going to. It wasn't quite time, not yet, to decide. She hadn't yet gone a significant distance. She peeked in the mirror for a glimpse of the face that belonged to that thick, masculine neck in the white collar. Silver sunglasses scrolled the miles. Tanned face. Firm jaw. He rolled down his window, slowly undid his tie, loosened the collar by pulling it back and forth. He pushed his fingers through the boyish lick of hair coming down on his forehead and settled the rolled-up sleeve in the open window, his hair thrashing wildly, revealing a receding hairline.

Although she had been slow to catch on, had been, instead, discovering what the gentleman looked like, she saw now that he must have slowed for her—she'd dropped to nearly fifty-five. Had he thought she was ogling him? Certainly not, she countered in her head. I was only watching for cops and joy riders. Or I was only admiring the lovely view of the valley behind. But her heart beat faster when she saw that he must have slowed for her. He had been patient, he had waited. Oh, forgive me, her thoughts cried to him. I hadn't done the same for you. I passed you, not even bothering to glance your way with the most decent curiosity, to smile. For God's sake, I could have smiled, have slowed for you. And if he had slowed, then the woman with the baby had slowed, for she was still behind, steady, faithful. Ahh, lovely strangers, kind strangers. Strangers with lives of your own.

Then it was her turn, the woman behind. More than once, already, she'd slowed for both of the others, had gotten separated, had had to maneuver to catch up. Now perhaps she wanted to see what it would be like up front. Come on up, she sang in her head as the woman pulled closer. Your turn. They could alternate positions as much as they liked. What did it matter, as long as they were together? Or—and she let the awareness sink in slowly—the woman was moving out and away, steadily, purposefully, as one nearing her destination.

She slowed to let the woman's little car gain speed, its four cylinders whirring, and as she slid past, she felt the woman look at her. She blinked, turned her head, too late. Too late to wave or give a friendly tap of the horn and smile. The mother moved safely to the front past the gentleman. Then she reached an arm back to her baby, looking back and forth from the baby to the road, one hand steering. The gentleman now bringing up the rear sent his hand through his hair again, slipped the tie from around his neck.

The three of them. Wasn't it wonderful? All coming from God knows where, all going God knows where. No matter. There on that stretch of freeway they had come together—met, joined, united—no,

there wasn't a name for it. Less than any relationship but surely, surely more than a coincidence. She wished she had a name for it. For what she and Tom were. She might never, now. To think she had ever been able to bear not knowing how to name it, and yet she saw that not knowing, longing to know, was the only safety for her. He nearly had me, she thought. So many times, a look or a touch, like a great push, and something nearly happened. The gentler, the more tentative, the more indecent it became. He didn't see that her fear wasn't the fear he thought it was. That she had to hide what swept through her and spread and rose. Not something lacking; it was excess many times over. She adjusted the rearview mirror, the side-view mirror, wiped her hand on her skirt. I must be grave, is what she thought. It's the only way.

The mountains ahead unfolded, becoming more distinct, making it quite clear that there was one road and it went up into them. She knew that it would end. She knew that it would end and that the woman and the baby and the gentleman would pass away without any of them ever acknowledging the others. The baby would cry out for food or a change of diapers, and the woman would take the nearest exit to stop and quiet her, change her, feed her, telling her, "Hush, there's a girl. We're almost home, almost home," and she would make a lullaby from the words. The gentleman, suddenly aware that something was different though he didn't know what—for had he ever really noticed the others, had she only wished it?—would step on it, tired of always being on the road, anxious to get home to his wife and a still pillow, to step in the door and pull out the little key rings, call out Jeremy, Amanda. Tired of always moving, impatient to be still for once.

Finally, it would be her turn. Not like with Tom, when they knew where they were going and had maps and brochures and reservations to show for it. All the little trips they took. Falling asleep beside him as he drove with his steady, forgiving hands, waking suddenly to a flock of blackbirds in a field just outside her window at sunset, so many more of them than she could ever have expected, so that when they rose—almost too suddenly, like the sky falling—something rose inside her, too, each one of them taking flight, together a crescendo. But, too soon, the heaviness, Tom looking over, smiling, offering coffee, a cigarette, his warm hand. Always a bright, spacious peace, a surety that became unsettling, like that day on the spot of yellow in the meadow, the horses moving against one another so surely, so heavily, it could never be disgusting. The same rapturous burden as when he had stopped that once on the highway, pulled over in the night and coaxed her from sleep, saying get out, get out, button up, look. The way he stood behind her, warming his hands inside her coat as the dark wind seeped around in gusts sounding like clean sheets flapping on a clothesline. The town below them sparkling in the clear cold. The

car coming down from the hill, its two headlights blurred, then coming into focus, distinct, separate, stars, eyes. And she thinking, knowing then, that pure joy is something grave, a thing to be quiet about. That it would empty you to try to give it or share it, if you could try. Tom's hand lifted over her head as he explained about Equuleus and Scutum and where to find them in the sky. And in her head a throbbing that went Tom Tom Tom Tom. As in winter, when the warmth from the heater became suffocating, and she cracked the window open to let in folds of cool air smelling of alfalfa or the sea or pine, so today she had had to let the air in. If she couldn't say it to him, if she couldn't say it to him. And she hadn't. And she had only given it more power.

She wanted only to say goodbye, somehow, for now, before she eased out from between these two who had come so far with her. But there hadn't even been hellos. Only the slightest possibility that for a while on a stretch of highway in the valley, she had started something with these strangers that hardly needed to be ended because it had hardly begun.

At first there was only a road sign, then the awareness of an off-ramp rising slightly and curving away from the mountain range. Then it was hands tightening on the wheel, the blinker flashing, the car veering into the right lane. She made no gesture, gave no sign, only moved away. So effortless, bearing off this way instead of that, although she had waited for some sort of sumptuous, ruinous melancholy. Her thoughts went with them a ways as they continued up into the range. She took the turn-off that led away, her foot pressing tentatively, then boldly, the car bolting around a curve. The others would become separated from one another, as well as she from them. Just as well, since night was falling, when you could never be sure, front, back, or sides, just who was who.

In a well-lit coffee shop not far from the foot of the range, she sat down to hot coffee and a cheeseburger. She peered at her reflection in the window—warily, secretively—for any visible signs of change. Beyond the curve of her shoulder, headlights made their way down from the mountain, taking the off-ramp. Any moment now she would make up her mind. She waited for night to seep into the twilight's rusty pink. A stream of silver buses descended to the sign that flashed EAT, turned into the parking lot. FAR WEST TOURS the buses read. The dim windows revealed moons of faces.

They emerged, yawning and stretching and taking slow, high steps like lost members of a marching band moving in slow motion. Some turned, lifted their faces to the evening breeze. Others tried to round up their children, who scurried toward the restaurant, leaping or dragging each other by the hand. Some of the older or more tired straggled in, squinting at the harsh lights inside. One small girl stood

with her hand in her mother's, opening and closing her mouth like a fish.

After a few quick sips of her second cup of coffee, she gulped the last of it and leaned back, deciding, as she smiled into the eyes of people she would never know, that she would call Tom after she had had her fill. Her voice light and even, her step light and even, and inside her, all she could stand to know today—motion, and always, always, anticipating the stillness after it, like hands alighting and hands then laid to rest.

They filled the booths and tables, filled the spaces around her so that she glanced from face to face, invisible to them, even with her eyes wide open, partly inviting, partly dazed, and she was nearly touching the elbow of the tired little girl. The dad twisted in his seat, first one way, then the other, impatient for the attention due him from a waitress. Something marvelous, apparently, had happened to these people. Together, they had been moved by someone—an actress, someone famous, perhaps. Someone no longer in their midst.

"She was absolutely terrific," the mother announced to her clan.

A fellow from the next table leaned their way. "Nothing like it I've ever seen." The slightly impatient father nodded, distributing identical glasses of soda left by the waitress. "Didn't you like it, Tracy?" he asked the little girl, who nodded slowly to her own reflection, her feet swinging under the table in pink tennis shoes with heart-printed laces. The swinging matched a rhythm in her head—something faintly familiar she had carried at the back of her mind all day, something lively.

Her feet still swinging, the girl looked upon her—an unwavering gaze that braced her as she wiped the corners of her mouth, a gaze that did away with the safe, close anonymity that had enveloped her all day. She shut her eyes to the girl's face, and a hundred conversations swelled around her—"Such a sad story," from her left. "Cried and cried . . ." from behind. "Goes to show you what some people will do for love. . . ." A few children began singing nearby—raucous, showy, delighted voices. But her head swayed slightly to a rhythm somewhere, to a strip of rushing asphalt before and behind. Somewhere in the mountains a gray sedan coasted home, a small car cleared the top. What skeins of roads to cover before she was really there?

Her eyes flew open, as though warned. She found herself looking into the face of the girl. "Oh my gawwd," she heard. Laughter. "It was perfect," someone insisted, his fist on the table. The high voice of a young woman somewhere near. "What is it what is it what is it?"

Then the pink feet slowed and the girl was opening her mouth to speak, and then the girl was asking her a question, so softly spoken

that she leaned slightly forward to hear and—she gave it some thought—to answer.

She spoke to the girl in a high whisper, so that she had to clear her throat, to repeat herself. She realized that she had spoken for the first time that day.