

Hollywood · Kevin J. Ryan

“LET’S DO SOMETHING different.”

“This is our first date, this *is* something different.”

“No, I mean really different,” she said. “Let’s drive up to the Strip and buy you a tattoo and pierce your ear and get a rooster cut and go to the Roxy.”

“And you?”

“I’ll trade in my Nash for a scooter, buy some red sunglasses and drive you around town.”

“Right now, this is enough for me.” He motioned toward the arc light in front of them which lit up the five-story Y of the Hollywood sign and the blue hood of her Nash Rambler, and then he pointed out the passenger window at the bowl of Los Angeles lights below.

“Did you know that in Yugoslavia the relatives of auto accident victims go back to the scene of the crash and erect a roadside monument?”

“No, I didn’t,” he said.

“It’s a warning to the other motorists: ‘Be careful buckaroo! We lost our little Yuri here! And unless you want to lose your little Yasha, don’t speed over the blood stains!’”

“A practical people.”

“They grow bright flowers around the monument so it stands out, especially at night. I guess they don’t have fluorescent paint.”

“Just because they’re behind the Iron Curtain doesn’t mean they don’t have fluorescent paint. It’s the twentieth century there, too.”

“That’s what I like about you. You’re different.”

“From who?”

“Everyone else at work. The first time I went out with Mr. Thompson, he wouldn’t even drive down here. Wouldn’t take his crummy old Cadillac down the dirt road.”

“In Wyoming, we make monuments to animals.”

“Animals?”

“Elk, moose, deer. Just about every town has a mound of antlers or an arch. Put a plaque at the base of it and there you have it.”

“What does the plaque say, ‘Here lies Gomer Moose and his family?’”

“Just the name of the town and when it was started. Maybe something about the place.”

“Aldous Kempton used to hunt. Aldous works in payroll, you’ll meet him after you’ve been on the job a month and they have time to screw up your benefits. He was the only guy who wasn’t afraid to drive down here in his own car, even on rainy nights. But he had a jeep.”

“I would have driven here.”

“Sure.”

“I’ve got front-wheel drive. It’ll go anywhere. You should have asked.”

She looked out of her window and pointed to the top of the sign. “My mother jumped off the Y in ’49.”

He turned to face her and listened with a curious half-smile.

“I was only one, my father told me all about it. She was pregnant by an assistant director—a *second* assistant director, just to add insult to injury.”

“I see.”

“No you don’t. She *knew* he was a second a.d., she didn’t care. She never even loved the guy, she loved my father.”

“I never doubted that.” He looked out the windshield. “How would a person even get up there?”

“It’s easy. You can’t see them from here, but there are braces all over the back of each letter. I used to climb on them all the time—talk about a jungle-gym.”

“It must have taken forever to get to the top.”

“I once did it in thirty minutes. But I was thirteen and wasn’t wearing high heels. I figured it must have taken her at least an hour, maybe just a little more. She was in good shape—size seven—but she also wore an evening dress, the kind Linda Darnell wore in *Letter to Three Wives*. Father said if it weren’t for the second a.d., mom could have played that part.”

“She was a movie star?”

“I didn’t say she was a movie star. She didn’t even like the movies. I said my father said she *could* have played the role, she was that pretty, she was that *talented*.”

“I once climbed the arch in Thistle.”

“What’s that?”

“Where I grew up. They have this arch over Main Street made of elk antlers. Thirteen hundred and eighty-one trophies in that one. I was fifteen and Clarissa Sudden dared me.”

“And you did it?”

“Sure, why not? She made good on the bet.”

“I see.”

“It wasn’t easy. Only two other guys had done it before. Some of those racks are over a hundred years old. People back then actually willed them to their children. You slip or an old antler cracks and you can get spiked bad.”

“In 1955, my father spent every penny he had on this Nash. He wanted to leave me something nice in his will. Then he left for Rabat.”

“Was he terminal? Did he have cancer or something?”

“Terminal love.” She sighed. “He loved me more than any other woman in the world.”

“From Rabat.”

“From Rabat and Alexandria, Aleppo and Izmir.”

“Was he a diplomat?”

“He was offered a job as key grip on *Roman Holiday*. He became personal friends with Audrey Hepburn. He loves the movies. It was his idea to move to L.A. after the war. That’s how she met him at Santa Monica Pier.”

“Your father.”

“The second a.d. They were filming and he was on lunch break. She talked him into driving her all the way to a cabin on Lake Arrowhead. He was fired—God, I’d like to know how she did it.”

He put his arm on the back of the car seat and slid next to her. “Your mother sounds interesting.”

“Very. I imagine driving around L.A. with her sometimes. I have always remembered her as a very funny person. She left a note. Guess what it said.”

He smiled and shrugged.

“One word: Why. That was all. No question mark, no period. Why the Y?, Y the Why? You can keep going on and on with it. It’s hard for me to take her seriously.”

“I think your mother and I would have gotten along well.”

“She got along with everybody. It’s not that my dad didn’t, he’d just rather stay at home, play the family man.”

“From Izmir?”

“It’s hard to be a family man without a family. My father’s a kind and forgiving man, but deep down, I don’t think he ever forgave her for leaving me. And then there’s the murder.”

“Murder?”

“An innocent victim was involved after all. My step-sister and I would have been great friends—I know. And father would have accepted her, he’s said so several times.”

“How do you know it was a girl?”

“That’s all mother would have. And father loves girls.”

“Your father is a very smart man.” He leaned forward and kissed her hair.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back. He kissed her neck. “My father is the most wonderful man in the world. He blamed himself for everything. He never let mother learn to drive; he always said if she had, there wouldn’t have been a problem, she wouldn’t have had to ask for rides all the time.”

He slid his hand over hers which rested on the steering wheel.

“In a letter, father once referred to the Nash as a prophylactic. He meant profitable. But he’s been right about both. I was once offered fifteen thousand.”

“For the car?”

“Of course.”

“It’s in great shape.”

She pointed to the odometer. “Forty-three thousand—*original* miles.”

“That’s all?” He leaned over to look and brushed his cheek against hers.

“That’s really something—I mean living in L.A.”

“I don’t drive much. In L.A., I always feel like I’m going somewhere even when I’m not. And it’s the only place you can be lonely in peace—no neighbor coming over with a casserole to find out why you’re not married and why you make sun tea in a Coke bottle. I once moved to San Diego—that only lasted two days.”

He kissed her on the cheek, and then on the mouth.

“Let’s walk around,” she said. They got out of the car and sat on the hood and looked down on the city. “This is my favorite spot.”

“I know.”

“Oh?”

“I mean I could tell from what you said.”

“Come over here. I want to show you something.” They walked over to the Y and then behind it. She took his hand and led him to a weathered two-by-twelve brace. “See those initials?”

He looked closely. "‘C.G.,’ I think, ‘loves C.L.’"

"Correct."

He looked at her. "So?"

"So who do you think they are?"

"Christ . . ." he waved his hand at the labyrinth of braces surrounding them. "There must be a million names carved into these things. How am I . . ."

"Here's a hint: Clark Gable."

". . . and Carole Lombard—no!"

"There it is."

"But . . . No. Anyone could have done that. It's a gag. Or it's Charles Gibson and Charlene Larson. Or Cedric Gorman and . . ."

"But it's not and it is *them*."

He cocked his head and smiled then pulled her toward him.

"And farther up," she said in his arms, "are Tracey and Hepburn and Bogart and Bacall." She pointed up and they both looked at the myriad beams of light shining through the rents and rifts in the Y throwing portions of the braces in bas-relief. "You can't see it very well from here, but several crossboards form a platform right at the V part of the Y. You can see Newport Beach on a night like this." She stepped up on the first brace and pulled his hand. "Come on."

He pulled his hand away. "You're not serious." He kicked one of the boards. It gave easily and sounded hollow.

"It's safe," she said and pulled herself up onto another brace. "Oh, *please?* The platform's wide enough to lie down on and look at the stars."

He hesitated.

"I've climbed this a hundred times." She turned and began to pull herself up.

"Wait," he said. She turned and looked down at him. "Give me a hand."

They climbed for fifteen minutes, then took a rest against one of the larger boards. A slight breeze set the Y in motion and dozens of boards creaked.

"Hey!" He yelled and grabbed the nearest brace and looked at her frantically.

"I know. It's kind of scary the first time. But it's not going to fall. The top of John Hancock in Chicago sways eight feet each hour."

“Yes, but this wasn’t built by . . .” He looked down and against the blackness of the ground he could not see any of the boards they had just climbed, only a few footholds were illuminated by the now ethereal spotlights shining through the vandalized and windblown holes in the Y. “Christ! How do we get down from here?”

“Really, there’s no need to panic. If we *had* to we could get down by feeling our way, but the best thing to do is wait for the moon to rise at 1:07. By then it will be light enough to see everything.”

“One-o-seven! Why that’s hours!”

“Come on. We’re almost to the platform. It’s just up and over there.” He looked where she pointed but only saw more boards backlit by the arc light shining over the top of the Y. He felt it move again.

“We should go down—now,” he said.

“I promise you nothing is going to happen. Trust me.” She smiled at him, turned, and began to climb.

He watched her move slowly away from him and then followed.

“It’s good to be careful,” she told him as they climbed. “But you don’t want to overdo it, you never want to overdo anything. Mother was overly impatient: ‘Impatient and impulsive—never knew what the woman would do next’ my father said. The coroner set her time of death at somewhere between midnight and one A.M. But I pegged it exactly at 11:45. Want to know why?”

He said nothing. Below her she heard his heavy breathing and each hand coming down firmly and methodically on each board.

“Because the moon came out that night at 11:48 and if she had waited until then, she would have looked back and seen a safe way down and never have jumped. So it happened before 11:48. They found the cab driver who dropped her off near the road a little after ten o’clock. I give her fifteen minutes to get down to the sign and an hour or so to get to the very top. That leaves thirty . . . probably twenty minutes. I’ve spent whole nights thinking about what she could have done for twenty minutes. I found out by accident a month ago. See, here’s the platform.”

She sat on the platform and waited for him. When his face appeared over the brace beside her she said, “I never have decided if mother didn’t know about the moonrise or if she knew and was racing the moon.”

He climbed past her until he could plant his left foot against a board nailed to the plywood forming the face of the Y, then he placed his right

foot on the platform. When he shifted his weight, the rotted board beneath his foot gave. He slipped and grabbed the brace above him and moved back into the shadow of the sign.

“This is crazy!” he said.

She turned and looked to where his voice sounded from the darkness. Her own face was lit by the arc light shining over the bottom of the V. “I saw a shrink on my seventh birthday. My guardians caught me trying to pee on the front tires of my Nash. I’d seen a dog do it and my foster mother told me it was marking its territory. I pretended the front tires were Mother and Father and I was letting them know who they belonged to. The psychiatrist told my parents it was a normal reaction.”

A two-foot gap separated the platform from the plywood Y. She leaned forward and placed both hands on the plywood and looked over the edge. “The Nash looks so much smaller from here.” She looked up at him. “If you just peek your head around you can see everything: Venice, Redondo Beach . . .”

He didn’t move.

She leaned over and wrapped her hand lightly around his ankle then rested her head against his leg. “Just give it a minute, darling.” She massaged his calf. “I know . . . I know. Everything will be all right. I won’t leave you.”

She looked up at his dark face and slowly inched backward on the platform. A strong wind started the Y swaying. She laid down and slowly unbuttoned her blouse. Her hair and blouse blew in the steady breeze, and she floated on the platform as on a wave. “Have you ever heard,” she told him above the wind, “about the wedding ceremony of the people who live in the Pontic Mountains in Turkey? The bride comes to the altar with all the children she will ever bear in her stomach. The whole ceremony centers on the bride and her first child, and it is blessed and prayers are said to insure the first one is a girl.

“The oldest man in the village leads the bride on a mare down to the Black Sea where she is bathed while the old man washes and grooms the mare. On the way back, they stop at a cliff above the sea and the old man leads the mare over the edge. At one time, the bride sometimes remained on the mare, but for every one they murdered two female children were born. Even after the women controlled the tribe, they continued the ritual.

“When the bride returns to the village, the couple is carried in a sedan to a secluded house in the next village. When they return, if the man is wearing a headband torn from their sheets the celebration continues.”

She pushed up to one elbow and stared into the shadow that contained the man. Her face and breasts were visible in the light as she pointed toward the top of the letter. “At the very top the initials S.K. and P.K. are carved inside a heart—my parents’ initials. She never finished the heart. She didn’t have time to join the halves—so you see, she was racing the moon.”