

## CHAPTER ONE

1981 – Ivy

1974 Mustang Hatchback, manual transmission, 4-cylinder, burgundy

I've always thought of cars as places to die. That's what high school driver's ed did to me. Sure, there was also the practical stuff: how close to follow, laws regarding school buses, what to do in a skid (the most terrifying, anti-intuitive lesson of all). But that's not what stuck. What stuck were the flickering black-and-white filmstrips narrated by dead drivers, forever regretting that one second they took their eyes off the road. Driver's ed ghost stories. They grabbed my throat like a garrote – sudden, violent, remorseless – convincing me that driving and death were not only interrelated but inevitable.

This was in the old days of Behind the Wheel, before lawyers were in charge, when the schools actually taught you to drive, and put you in a car with your high school gym teacher. Mine, Mr. Kapsopoulos, or Mr. K. for short, was an excitable Greek, taken to screaming at other drivers with a clenched fist: "Where'd you get your driver's license? Cereal box?" He taught us that the horn was more important than the brakes, and if we were on the highway, forbade us from slowing down when another car was merging from the right. He insisted it was the merging car's job to join the flow of traffic, but what, I wondered, if the driver in that car hadn't been taught by Mr. K? What if he was expecting a little help? All that mind reading, the judging of speeds and velocity, the opportunities for misunderstanding: to me, a fiery crash as likely an outcome as any. I put off getting my license until I was 23 – much to the hilarity of my family and everybody in my hometown, Charlottesville. My dad was the local Buick dealer.

Ellis on the other hand, grew up in New Jersey without even a twinge of car fear. Maybe they didn't subscribe to the Edgar Allen Poe school of driver's ed in New Jersey. Ellis marked the days leading up to his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday like some automotive advent calendar. To the steering wheel born, I guess. In my imagination, his Behind-the-Wheel teacher spoke like Jeeves and held out a platter with caviar whenever he stopped at a light. To Ellis, the car was the extension of the bicycle, which was the extension of the trike, just another step in his trajectory from the womb to adulthood. If to me, the car was Thanatos, to Ellis it was Eros. A

conveyance handy for driving a date to the movies, feeling her up, maybe even getting luckier. If to me, a car was to be driven slowly and cautiously, or preferably not at all, to Ellis a car was a toy – the shinier and faster the better.

Did I ever think of this as a deal breaker, in those first days we were dating? Perhaps if there was a Sedgewick-Inglebert Driving Compatibility Inventory, Ellis and I might have showed up to a high school gymnasium at 8:30 one Saturday morning with our sharpened number two pencils, answered questions about yielding and the proper method of signaling parallel parking, and been told that our attitude towards cars was so clearly incompatible that we'd be better off never seeing each other again.

But there is no Sedgewick-Inglebert test. Besides, when I met Ellis, we were both living in New York City, where cars are optional. And of course love is blind, especially at the beginning, especially in matters like following distances and turn signals.

I should probably explain that the New York City I had moved to, the New York of my psyche the year I met Ellis, was more a stage set than a real place. It was the Manhattan of Woody Allen movies, “Odd Couple” reruns, Marilyn Monroe standing on the air vent, and Marlo Thomas as “That Girl,” smiling perkily from behind the counter in her midtown candy shop. Before I moved to Manhattan, I'd only been there once, a weekend excursion of the high school art club. We'd descended the magnificent spiral of the Guggenheim Museum, seen “The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds” and eaten what seemed like an extremely exotic meal at Benihana. That was it, the sum of my experience in Gotham. A decade later, I was as starry-eyed as a shortstop buttoning his pinstripe jersey in the Bronx for the first time. Boxy yellow taxis zoomed down Broadway as if for my personal amusement.

Like all adopted New Yorkers, I came for nothing less than complete transformation. For the past four years, I'd lived with Nick, a chef, in a cute little farmhouse nestled in the Blue Ridge, outside Charlottesville. I met Nick in my fourth year at U.Va., when I'd decided to pick up a little money by waitressing in one of the new chic downtown restaurants. Those were the heady, early days of Charlottesville as a foody place and we all felt like we were part of something big and exciting. Nick had a noble Gallic nose and the chiseled angularity of someone who could cook with fresh butter and never gain weight. He knew his wines, he knew his cheeses, he knew how to pleasure a woman. I probably fell for his farmhouse hardest of all. It was only about 12 miles from the house where I'd grown up, where my parents still lived, yet it felt like it existed in an entirely separate universe, blessed by a stronger,

brighter sun. I could see myself there forever, writing novels at the sturdy wooden kitchen table, painted a playful 1950's shade of aqua.

But it was a fantasy – the whole thing with Nick – a fairy tale. I didn't fit in either at the high-class restaurant scene or with the celebrated authors who dropped into Nick's restaurant whenever their agents visited Charlottesville. I was too young to appreciate my youth and not smart enough to recognize my own intelligence. Everywhere I looked, I saw coeds who were more coltish, waitresses who were sexier and brilliant older women professors, who let their hair go white as if to telegraph their intellectual gravitas. I was just another former English major with a dozen unpublished short stories. And the butter that never showed up on Nick's hips was beginning to show on mine.

Looking back, it's hard to imagine the logic of my decision to move to New York. If I was a small fish in the pond that was Charlottesville, I'd be plankton in the mighty harbor of New York. But I was depressed by the same old parties with the same old snobs, with Nick's flirtations with new waitresses. And Nick could be cruel too, especially when it came to my cooking. I once spent a whole day making chicken Marsala. He took two bites and put down his fork, then got some of his own leftovers out of the refrigerator and ate them cold. He didn't say a thing. He didn't need to.

My part-time jobs – at Nick's restaurant, Williams Corner Bookstore, the Virginia Quarterly Review Press – didn't add up to a career. The few pages that rolled through my manual Royal typewriter didn't add up to a novel. I had gotten to the point where I didn't know what I hated more: the pretensions of the central Virginia country elite, with their horsey weekends and their old-fashioned croquet parties where everyone wore white, or the rednecks at the 7-Eleven. I was at a dead end. Bailey, my sister, had managed to transplant herself to L.A. I would try New York.

So I sold my car for \$700 (it broke Dad's heart to see me get so little for a car that came off his lot) and at his insistence converted the money into traveler's checks, carefully recording their serial numbers in my journal. My mother packed me deviled eggs to bring on the Amtrak, and reminded me to eat them in the first few hours, before they spoiled. When the train pulled out, I looked back and saw my parents grow smaller and smaller, until they were the size of wedding cake toppers. I felt a pinch of homesickness, and guilt too, for leaving them without any daughters nearby. But they were healthy and had each other, and I was riding into my grand future.

It was late March. I stayed, my first month or so, in the cramped den of a rent-controlled post-war apartment on the West Side, which belonged to a divorced voice teacher in her late 50's named Betty, the

mother of my best friend from college, Tess. Betty would “adore” the company, Tess insisted.

But even though Betty occasionally made a pot of Orange Pekoe and invited me to sit in one of her stiff wingback chairs and talk about my day, I felt a sort of coolness, like she didn’t want me getting too comfortable. Literally. Betty kept her apartment at 65 degrees, and I wasn’t allowed in the living room during voice lessons. I had to wait for the short intervals between students to sprint to the dark galley kitchen where I kept my own box of Lemon Zinger and a small supply of yogurt. Betty’s 12-year-old cat, Simon, had tuna breath and a problem with flatulence, and slept in the same room I did. He arched his back whenever I walked in, reminding me I was the interloper – a gesture that brought to mind some of the crustier matriarchs of the Virginia aristocracy.

I adapted. I wore a sweatshirt over my pajamas, and brought Simon a succession of cheap squeaky mouse toys to try to win his affection. I splurged on treats for Betty too, regularly stopping at Zabar’s for chocolate croissants and nice-sized hunks of Gruyere. Although I’d shipped my old Royal typewriter to the apartment, the first time I typed a sentence, I realized that in such tight quarters each keystroke sounded like a gunshot. A paragraph would have sounded like the St. Valentine’s Day massacre. I didn’t dare use it unless Betty was out.

But who cared? I was in New York. The first weekend, I rode all the way to Coney Island, wandered the narrow cobblestone alleys near Wall Street and rode the elevator to the top of the World Trade Center. You could pick up the Sunday Times on Saturday night and make a cheap dinner out of a gigantic slice of Original Ray’s Pizza. I learned quickly that all the Ray’s were the “original” and disdained by real New Yorkers, but I still loved the thick gooey almost raw-in-the-middle slices.

My heart thrummed when I looked through all the entertainment listings in the Village Voice. If I didn’t find a job before my \$700 ran out – although I was sure I would – I wanted to make sure I’d experienced everything it was possible to experience. At least everything that was free or cheap. And so my third week, seeing a “new talent night” with a modest \$5 cover at a downtown comedy club, I left Betty to watch “Knots Landing” and hopped the subway to see live comedy for the first time in my life.

The club was in the Village, a jumble of alleys that refused to participate in the city’s the rational north-south, east-west grid system. As a newcomer, it felt as if some higher power had just taken the map of Manhattan, pointed to Greenwich Village, and maliciously twisted it into a knot. I got off the subway in Washington Square, completely disoriented, and saw NYU kids, relaxed, laughing, walking down through the park in little happy clutches. They weren’t really much different from

the kind of kids I'd seen at U.Va. my whole life, but I was jealous of the fact that they felt so at home, that their home was here, that they traveled in packs. Illogically, I took it personally, as if they were leaving me out on purpose. My cheeks burned; I couldn't bring myself to ask for directions. Instead, I walked in circles, determined to find the address on my own, feeling more turned around, out of place and lonely with every step.

I found it, finally, underneath an Indian restaurant, down a narrow flight of concrete stairs. It looked exactly how I imagined a comedy club would look – exposed brick, long narrow tables at right angles to the stage, a microphone stand next to a tall wooden stool – but somehow shabbier. The chairs were plain, hard and close together and the room was even colder than Betty's. There was a bad smell too: a mixture of spilled beer, ashtrays and a men's room urinal not quite far enough down the hall.

I was led to a table by a girl about my age with spiky black hair, an eyebrow ring and an expression of practiced scorn. There was a hardness to her that made me think she hadn't been to college, but had been working at clubs and restaurants for years. Following her, I felt bland and conventional, like a sorority girl in an Angora sweater. From the 1950's. I hadn't been a sorority girl. Growing up, I'd been the rebel, the freak, the one who was turned away from the country club for wearing denim. But if I was the least ladylike young lady in my family's circle of friends, here I was just a soft-faced girl, demure and slightly nervous.

She seated me right up front, next to the stage. Even I knew that it was a bad idea to sit so close, but I was too intimidated to say anything. It was early, half an hour until the show, and I was the only one in the room. I started to wish I was back watching Knott's Landing. What was I doing? Who went to see comedy by themselves? I pulled out a paperback I'd stuck in my bag – a biography of Zelda Fitzgerald – but couldn't concentrate. A harsh inner voice was too busy berating me. You idiot. You rube. You stupid hick. Why didn't you ask for a different seat before you sat down?

The girl came back a few minutes later and asked what I wanted. "Oh nothing," I said, smiling. It came out like somebody who'd been trained, since childhood, never to trouble her host. That's what you were supposed to say when you went to somebody's house and they offered to get you something. "Oh nothing, thank you." You didn't even accept a glass of water unless your host had offered three times. Then it was okay. It wasn't that I was trying to save the waitress any trouble. I was trying to save money. It just came out in that sappy, Southern, overly-polite way – the way I'd been indoctrinated. Thank God I hadn't said ma'am.

The waitress sighed. She picked up a laminated card, which listed a variety of imported beers and expensive drinks, and pointed to the words “two-drink minimum.”

“Oh,” I said. My heart slipped a notch. The listing had just mentioned the \$5 cover. It hadn’t said anything about a two-drink minimum. If I’d known, I might not have come. Sure, it was a relatively small thing. But I hadn’t found a job, and New York was sucking up money like an industrial vacuum. I felt duped and flustered, as if the entire purpose of the two-drink minimum was to humiliate me.

“Oh,” I said. “I guess I’ll have a Diet Coke.”

The evening went downhill from there. The room gradually filled with couples and groups, all showily having fun. I felt like the kid in the cafeteria sitting alone. A few guys tried to hit on me, but they were losers, pathetic guys with comb-overs and oily pick-up lines. And then the show started. A single girl, by herself, sitting in the front? The comics pounced. Where was I from? (I might as well have been wearing a t-shirt that said, “out of town.”) Where was my boyfriend? What? I didn’t have a boyfriend? Why? Did I have herpes? What was I doing after the show? After a while, I had to pee, but the idea of being teased on my way to the bathroom kept me frozen in my seat.

Yet, even in my misery, there was one comedian who struck me as kind of cute. He looked like an overgrown baby chick, tall and skinny with wide-open eyes and fluffy hair in an Elvis Costello sort of do. He seemed nervous as he climbed on the stool, like he was afraid he might knock it over. I found that endearing. I liked his set – he was the only comic who didn’t rely on profanity – and when he finished, I realized that I had, for a brief five minutes, forgotten how unhappy I was. But he was followed by a female comic who appeared to be on Angel Dust, stunning the audience into silence with an incoherent tirade about being fucked by her father when she was 13.

Finally, the show ended and the waitress slipped a check on my table. I felt like a hostage being released from a long ordeal. The whole evening had been a mistake. I should have waited until I’d made some friends. Maybe live comedy wasn’t my thing. The club was skanky. I’d known it as soon as I walked in. I’d just been too embarrassed to turn around. And that bitchy waitress. What kind of employee treated customers that way? You walked into Honeycutt Motors and you were greeted with a warm smile. Daddy would have fired that waitress in a minute.

I picked up the bill, then blinked twice, not sure I was seeing right. I’d been charged four dollars apiece for my Diet Cokes. Four dollars for a Diet Coke, and they hadn’t even brought me a whole can! Never in my life had I been charged more than a dollar fifty for soda. True, I was

coming to New York from Charlottesville, where things were considerably cheaper, but even so. Four dollars for a Diet Coke?

The waitress came back, her mouth twisted like she'd been sucking lemons, and waited for me to produce the money. She was making it clear, in case I still didn't get it, that I was just another tedious chore in her evening, like sliding chairs under the table and sweeping the floor after the last customer left. There wasn't an ounce of warmth, not the merest acknowledgement that we were both human beings on the same planet, let alone two girls the same age in the same city.

And that was when I snapped. The whole evening had punctured my Macy's balloon of a Manhattan daydream. I suddenly understood that I was outmatched by this city, that the Woody Allen-Marilyn Monroe-Odd Couple-That Girl fantasy that I'd been floating on so buoyantly for the past couple weeks was just that – a fantasy. What an idiot I was, staking my future on something as real as an episode of "My Favorite Martian." I was going to find fame and fortune in New York? I was going to sit in cafes and write the Great American Novel? Right. I couldn't even manage to order a Diet Coke without being humiliated.

But I still had an ounce of fight left. I picked up the bill, held it up to the waitress's face and with a dramatic flourish, tore it in half. I wasn't just mad, I was seething: a French revolutionary avenging the excesses of Marie Antoinette. "Four dollars for a Diet Coke?" I said through clenched teeth. "I may be from out of town, but I'm not an idiot."

The girl flinched. For the first time that evening she looked at me as if I wasn't a piece of furniture. She looked at me like I was a rabid dog, maybe a piece of furniture that had turned into a rabid dog. She tried backing up, but she was right against the raised stage and wearing ridiculous clunky platform boots. I saw her eyes dart around, looking for a manager. She reminded me of the kids in the gym at the end of the movie "Carrie." I felt righteous, even powerful, as I stared her down. Finally, she moved a chair and stalked off. I heard her mutter "crazy bitch" under her breath.

Then, abruptly, the Great Comedy Club Revolt of 1981 was over. I crumpled to the table and began to sob. It was awful. An embarrassment. I was doing what a Southern lady never did, calling attention to myself. But I was no more capable of stopping than of holding back a monsoon. If I had to look at that waitress again, if she sneered at me once more or brought over a manager, I'd shrivel up and melt right into the earth.

Suddenly, I felt the slight pressure of a hand on my shoulder. I looked up to see the cute comedian.

He pulled out his wallet, put a twenty on the table, and with the slightest touch to my elbow, stood me up. "Let's blow this taco stand," he said, retrieving my purse from the floor. He led me out of the comedy

club onto the street. I walked next to him trustingly, like a child, not knowing why, not knowing where, the city lights distorted into hallucinatory coronas through my tears. When he stopped a few blocks later and opened up the passenger door of a dinged-up car, I got in.

As he crossed in front of the car to his side, it occurred to me that I'd just done what I'd been warned since childhood never to do, gotten into a car with a complete stranger. But it didn't matter. He wasn't a stranger. Not really. I felt like I'd known him all my life. Or if he was a stranger, he was that stranger that you meet in the forest in the middle of a fairy tale, the one who saves you. He got in the car, reached in his pocket and pulled out a handkerchief. A handkerchief! It was so old fashioned. A gentleman, no less. He wiped my cheek and then handed over the handkerchief. "You're a mess," he said. He had the warmest smile. "I'm Ellis. Where you going?" I knew at that moment, I was home.

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It wasn't just that Ellis had rescued me from my moment of disgrace. Part of the charm was that he swept me away in a car. Anywhere else that would have been unremarkable, but in New York City? Who bothered owning a car in New York City, where there were subways, buses and taxis in abundance, and where parking garages cost hundreds of dollars a month? I'd have hardly been more surprised had Ellis lifted me up onto a steed.

But a car was even better. The glass and metal provided a hard protective shell, which kept the dangers of the city out – the weird, the homeless, the deranged – and yet, wondrously, still available for my observation. It was like watching a movie. I ruined Ellis's handkerchief, turning it black with mascara. I would have to offer to buy him a new one. He drove comfortably, one hand on the wheel, unperturbed by maniacal taxis, like someone enjoying sunset on a yacht. Once he found out I was new to town, he started pointing out sights. And when he found out I hadn't eaten dinner, he took me to the Empire Diner, a little chrome dining car with Art Deco lettering, where I had a hamburger, fat greasy onion rings and the first malted milk shake of my life.

I fell in love with Ellis that night, and when he pulled up in front of Betty's apartment building, we sat for an hour and a half telling our life stories, not budging when a few cars, trying to get a jump on alternate-side-of-the-street parking, flashed their lights. I was reluctant to open the door and break the spell, afraid I'd never see him again, even though we'd already written down each other's phone numbers on napkins. I even thought of leaving something behind Cinderella-style, just to make sure. The only thing that could release me was a kiss. I was actually embarrassed when Ellis finally leaned over to put his mouth on mine,

thinking of the onion rings, but the kiss was long and exploring and filled with promises.

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In retrospect, Ellis's '74 Mustang was a pathetic little sardine-can of a motor vehicle. But from that first night, when it conveyed me comfortably and conveniently home, until our trip to meet Ellis's mother in the Berkshires that Thanksgiving, I had not a single complaint. Nor would I tolerate anybody else's criticism. Within two weeks of meeting Ellis, I was sure that I'd won the lottery of life, and was calling everyone I knew. I went on and on about the four-dollar cokes, how he'd rescued me, what a gentleman he was, always opening the door – who did that anymore? – and how extraordinary it was to be ferried around New York City. My mantra had become, "Love means never having to take the subway." It never failed to crack me up.

All Bailey wanted to know was, "What does he drive?" Embarrassingly, for the daughter of a car dealer, I hadn't even noticed. But Bailey lived in L.A., where such things mattered, and she persisted. Finally I remembered it was the same kind of car that Eric Hutchison drove in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. "A Mustang?" Bailey snorted.

"Something like that."

"Eternal teenager." Bailey, at the time, was dating a plastic surgeon who drove a Jaguar. My father wasn't quite as dismissive, but I could tell he'd have been happier if I'd been dating a Buick man.

Since we started going out in the spring, I didn't know about the small problem with the Mustang's heating system (it didn't work) or that the windshield was apt to fog up in damp weather. Nor was I fazed by the large dent in the passenger door or the rear bumper, I had come to see these small flaws the way Ellis did, as anti-theft devices. It turned out that he parked the car on the street.

From that first night, Ellis was both protector and personal docent, opening up New York City like a treasure chest, every weekend presenting a new trinket: the Unisphere from the 1964 World's Fair, a whole block of Indian restaurants in the East Village, the Dakota, where John Lennon had lived and died. And in the process, we also, slowly, unwrapped ourselves, our histories, our love lives, our childhoods, our dreams.

Ellis was Jewish, which made him exotic, by Charlottesville standards. I was fascinated, though a little repelled, by his stories about his mother. Sheba, the shrink. How he had to walk around in socks and whisper in his own house because his mother was always in the den with clients. How the brothers learned to fight – even punch-in-the-stomach, falling-on-the floor, wrestling matches – without making a noise, so as not to disturb a session. How they were the only kids in the neighborhood

who didn't get to watch TV, because Sheba was convinced it would interfere with their psychosocial development. Her strange coldness and reserve. For a woman who allegedly dealt in feelings, she was oddly clinical when Ellis got upset as a kid, never taking him into her arms but instead offering him a box of tissues. He rarely spoke about his father. There'd been a messy divorce. A hint of some betrayal, nothing explained.

Sheba seemed like the polar opposite of my mother, who was so chirpy she might have flown right out of Disney's "Cinderella." My mom went around the house singing and humming, hugging us so randomly that by the time I was in high school, I'd dart into my bedroom if I heard her on the stairs. Mom delighted in making our special breakfasts every weekend: silver-dollar pancakes for Bailey, French toast for me. It was the kind of childhood everybody wants – family dinners, loving parents, tons of presents under the tree – but hardly anything for an aspiring writer to work with. The cold and withholding Sheba, with the strange name and the mysterious divorce, was far more interesting.

Ellis, it turned out, was not really a stand-up comic. Not professionally, anyway. He was trying it out, going to open-mic sessions and new-talent nights. Though I always made sure to tell people I was dating a comedian, this being a very cool thing, I was spooked by comedy clubs after that first experience, and made excuses not to see Ellis perform. As for club where we'd met, I wouldn't even set foot on that block. On nights when Ellis had a gig there, I stayed home, worrying just a little that there might be a fresh transplant to the city for him to rescue.

For a real job, Ellis worked four days a week as a guide for the Gray Line, standing at the front of the bus with a microphone, delivering his shtick, and trying not to fall when driver slammed the brakes. It figured that Ellis's job would involve wheels and a microphone. I didn't worry that what he did wasn't conventionally ambitious. I trusted in his brilliance.

By May, I'd found a job, covering stemware, kitchenware and linens for a little trade magazine called The Restaurant Roll, and had moved out of Betty's spare bedroom into an apartment share 12 blocks uptown. Not exactly my fantasy career, but at least it made decent use of my restaurant experience and carried health insurance. Ellis and I spent all our weekends together. By fall, I was starting to have active fantasies about moving in. Things had gotten comfortable and the sightseeing phase was over. We were happy on a Saturday night just to bring in some samosas and watch an old movie on TV. I knew we'd reached a certain threshold of intimacy when Ellis started listening to his phone machine messages in front of me. His former girlfriends weren't calling anymore.

And then came the invitation that threw the progress of our relationship into sudden sharp relief, a summons from Sheba to spend Thanksgiving in the Berkshires.

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At first, I was deliriously happy. Ellis's mother wanted to meet me. An excellent sign. He must have been talking about me a lot. But my euphoria was soon replaced by a nervousness bordering on obsession. What if Sheba didn't like me? How potent were her psychological powers? I convinced myself that Sheba the Shrink could read minds, that she'd be able to read mine, that she would find my character flawed, my personality borderline.

Even if I'd been perfectly normal before the invitation to Thanksgiving, wasn't my obsessive fear of Sheba's rejection proof of some fatal flaw?

Then there was the long-distance pouting of my mother, who had jumped onto the Martha Stewart bandwagon early, and whose already legendary Thanksgivings had become geometrically more complex each year. She was so certain that I'd be joining the family that she'd already made me a reservation on the Amtrak.

"Sorry Mom. I'm going to Ellis's mother's house in the Berkshires."

"Oh," she said, sounding wounded. "That's wonderful." But she quickly recovered. "So you and Ellis will come for Christmas, right?"

Thus began the inevitable competition between the future mothers-in-laws, which would make sibling rivalry seem like child's play.

My mood swung wildly: bliss, panic and filial guilt finally overtaken by a sense of adventure, even excitement. Without evidence, with neither photographs nor corroboration from Ellis, I began to construct a mental picture of Sheba's Berkshires house. I built it in the style of Frank Lloyd Wright, with windows overlooking a copse of birches. I decorated the living room with black leather sling chairs and a white bearskin rug. Presiding over it all was a massive stone fireplace. There would be nothing fussy, crocheted or embroidered. And there'd be books, thousands of books. Smart books too. No orphaned Reader's Digests or paperback beach reads, but volumes of Proust, Dostoevsky, Sartre.

In short, it would be the opposite of my parents' endearing little Colonial, filled with so many of my mother's antiques that you couldn't find a flat surface to put your coffee down.

A few days before the trip, my mother reminded me to wear the ankle-length blue down coat, the one I'd bought at Belk's the year before. "It'll be cold," she said, as if this was special, privileged information. But the down coat looked like a sleeping bag. I'd just bought a cute little faux

fur jacket at Strawberry, and this was the fashion statement I intended to present to Ellis, his brothers, his mother and their stepfather.

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An hour into our trip, I realized the desperate state of Ellis's heater. I sat my shivering in the passenger seat, hunched into a tight ball, my cute little faux fur jacket offering as much insulation from the elements as a toilet seat cover. My mother had been right. I should have worn the down.

The trip had started pleasantly enough. I handed Ellis a new boxed set of cassettes, "The News from Lake Wobegon," which I'd bought for the journey, and he, in turn, passed me a joint. Neither of us had been able to get off early from work, so it was dark when we left, but the first 50 miles or so rolled by pleasantly enough as Keillor purred hypnotically about the Chatterbox Café and bachelor farmers. But somewhere in Connecticut, I began shivering too much to pay attention. This was the first time I'd felt anything but grateful about Ellis's car. Now I reverted to being the daughter of a car dealer, appalled my boyfriend had taken me off to the mountains in November in a car without working heat.

Then it began to snow. Serious snow – not some delicate laceworks, but giant clumps. Like God, that bully, was starting a one-way snowball fight. I held my breath, wondering whether Ellis's windshield wipers would be as ineffectual as his heater, then relaxed slightly as they batted furiously at onslaught. Still, coming from Virginia, the combination of snow and driving filled me with alarm. It hadn't occurred to me to listen to a weather forecast. It must have been a few days since I'd talked to my mother, because if there'd been even a hint of snow, she'd have begged me to reconsider.

I looked over at Ellis, who had turned off the tape player and was looking more alert. I willed myself to see him through a romantic scrim: Pa, from Little House in the Prairie, trudging home through a blizzard. Competent, strong, unflustered. As if reading my mind, he took his right hand off the steering wheel and patted my knee. "Don't worry," he smiled. "Up north, we learn to drive in snow." I replaced his hand on the wheel and swallowed my terror. This was what women were supposed to do, right? Keep their mouths shut and stand by their men. Stay out of the way. Suck our fear tightly inside our bellies. I tried to forget the pot we'd both smoked an hour earlier.

I remembered that men think about baseball statistics to keep from coming when they're making love, and in the same spirit I decided to do a mental inventory of every article of clothing I'd ever owned. Favorite coats, going back to when I was a kid. All the shoes in my closet. How many jeans I owned and in what sizes. In my mind, I folded sweaters and

stacked them neatly in an imaginary closet. I was cataloguing my blouses when the car went into a skid.

The car suddenly skidded to the right. We were flying, leaving the familiar world of friction and gravity, skittering towards oblivion. I slammed a phantom brake, and as if responding to my command, the car suddenly hooked left. Sharply. And then we began to spin. I squeezed my eyes shut and braced for the clash of metal on metal, for shattered glass, blood. In real time, it couldn't have lasted more than a second. But during that second, time opened into an infinity of fear. It was like staring down into your own grave.

And then, miraculously, I felt the car unwind itself from the centrifuge. I opened my eyes and we were back where we're supposed to be, heading forward.

"Ellis!" I screamed.

"What?"

"You almost got us killed."

My heart was pounding. It was the first time I'd ever been afraid in the car with Ellis. True, his city driving did occasionally seem a tad aggressive. Once or twice I'd held my breath when he squeezed between a row of taxis and a stopped bus. But I'd never really felt like I was going to die.

My fear turned to anger. Ellis's job was to protect me, not get me killed. This was stupid. We shouldn't be driving. I didn't care how much supposed "experience" he had driving in the snow. We should stop.

And then I noticed a strange thing. Ellis was angry too. He stared straight ahead, his jaw set, his top teeth biting into his bottom lip, as if his feelings were so dangerous they needed to be prevented, physically, from flying out.

"What?" I said.

No answer.

It was unbelievable. Ellis was angry at me? "My God, Ellis," I said. "We've got to stop. I don't know what's going on in there" – I gestured at his head – "Why you're so mad. But I'm ... I'm terrified."

"One little skid? That's all it takes?"

"It wasn't just a skid. It was a...a ..." I searched for the word. "A fishtail! A 360!"

"God, you're such a drama queen."

Drama queen? Had he really said drama queen? Was this my prince, my rescuer, my tender playmate of the past seven months? I felt like I'd been punched.

"I'm not allowed to be scared?" I could hear my voice rising into the hysterical range. Not attractive.

“Sure, be scared. Be scared all you want.” Here was something I’d never heard from Ellis before, at least not directed at me. Sarcasm.

I searched my memory, reviewing the time we’d been together. Had we ever had a fight? Of course we’d had disagreements. We’d even had a couple of normal I-think-we-should-probably-see-other-people periods. We’d had differences about what movie to see, where to go to dinner, please stop snoring, why were you flirting with that girl at the party? But never a real fight.

I was just beginning to suspect that there were hidden edges to our relationship. Rule #1: I would get limitless love as long as I gave limitless approval.

The snow kept falling, a rare November blizzard. And the wind was picking up. I didn’t know what was worse: Ellis being angry at me, or the fact that the world had been reduced to a bleary windshield and our two headlights, with snow so big and wet it looked like it had been invented just to mock us. No, that’s not true. I did know which was worse. Death was worse. I’d lived without Ellis, and it may have been a pale, echoless version of the life I’d been living since April. But it was still life.

“Ellis. We’ve got to stop.”

“Where?” he said, indicating the nothingness outside our car.

“Where?”

“I don’t know. A motel?”

“Do you see a motel?”

I leaned forward, peaking through the little semi-circle created by the windshield wipers. There was nothing. The world had been reduced to a car, a snowstorm, an angry boyfriend, almost certain death.

“The next exit then?”

He shrugged, as if he didn’t want to encourage stupid questions. Contempt. Definitely contempt.

I crossed my arms. “We should have stopped before, when it started snowing.”

Ellis looked away from the road for a second, taking time to fix me with a withering stare. “I know that in Virginia people don’t know how to drive in snow.” He enunciated each word distinctly, and the word “Virginia” came out like an insult. Like Alabama or Mississippi, a place full of hicks and a history of slavery. “Here, in the northeast, we learn to drive in snow.” I could see this working its way into a future comedy routine, and I didn’t like it.

“Yeah, right. That was an excellent demonstration before.”

We drove for a while in silence. I tucked my hands under my armpits, then used them to warm my nose. For a while, the simple struggle for heat absorbed me. Then fear crept back in. I started thinking

about everybody I'd ever known who'd died in a car crash. The four seniors who were killed my sophomore year, and how we all came back to school that Monday and the principal broke down crying during assembly. The grief counselors. The flowers and teddy bears that accumulated in massive piles in front of the four lockers. Did I mention this was just a few months before I started Driver's Ed?

Then there was the Japanese family up the street that I babysat for occasionally. One not the mother went out to the store for milk and eggs and was killed by a drunk driver on the way home. I babysat the kids once after that happened, before the family moved away. Their rec room had turned into a mausoleum. The kids, always super polite and reserved, even before the accident, were silent for hours. It was as if the air had been sucked out of the house, and grief had taken its place. When the husband got home, and began digging in his wallet to pay me, I waved him off, fleeing for the door. I'd felt like I was suffocating.

I looked over to see Ellis, grim and concentrating, his hands clutching the wheel tightly.

"So," I said. "Tell me again about your mother."

I was offering an olive branch. I didn't care about his mother, not at that moment anyway, but ever since the car had spun around, there hadn't been one pleasant word between us. I had to restart conversation, without complaining about my discomfort or the danger.

Ellis exhaled audibly, as if considering whether he wanted to talk to me.

"What do you want to know?"

"I don't know. Anything."

"Okay," he said, turning to me with just the faintest trace of a smile. "She hates Thanksgiving."

I burst out laughing. "Sheba hates Thanksgiving?" We were risking life and limb to drive to her house, in the snow, to join her for a holiday she hated? "This is a joke, right?"

"No." He looked wounded. "She really hates Thanksgiving."

"Ok, I'll play. Why does she hate Thanksgiving?"

"Never mind."

"No, seriously. You can't start something like this and not finish."

He stared straight ahead. "You think it's a joke."

"I think it's funny that we're driving through a blizzard to get to your mother's house for Thanksgiving, a holiday which I now learn she hates. Especially when we could have gone down to see my mother, who loves Thanksgiving. But I really want to know. Why" – I struggled for a neutral tone – "does your mother hate Thanksgiving?"

Ellis absently started thrumming his fingers on the steering wheel. “Well, first of all, she can’t make turkey. Every time she tries, it turns out all burned and dried out, or else bloody in the middle.”

I shook my head. Even I had made a turkey. Anybody could make a turkey. That was the easy part, my mother always said. There was no peeling, grating, chopping or measuring. You just put the bird in the oven and basted it every few hours. I laughed so hard now my shoulders were shaking. Tears rolled down my face.

“But that’s not all.”

“What else?”

“It’s the time of year my dad moved out. Our first holiday as a broken family.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have joked.”

“It’s okay.”

We drove a few minutes in silence. I wanted to know more, to find out whether there’d been years of fighting, or an affair. But I held back.

And then I saw it, a shadow on the side of the road up ahead. Not trees, something vaguely rectangular. Could it be...?

“There! Ellis, look! Stop!”

But he didn’t stop. The car continued, its headlights briefly touching what was indeed a roadside motel, what they called a “Motor Hotel” in the old days, before the era of the interstate highway and the Holiday Inn. It was just a blur in the snow, but you could just make out the shape. It was the kind of place people stayed before there were Holiday Inns. Where traveling salesmen and lovers sometimes still stayed. Where my mother would never stay. I could picture the sagging mattress, the thin bedspread, the moldy rug, the stained toilet. I didn’t care. I couldn’t even tell if the motel was open. It could have been boarded up years ago. But it was a chance!

“Ellis!”

He didn’t even slow down.

I couldn’t believe it. This was the guy who’d rescued me from the comedy club, who I’d started to believe I would live with forever? What an asshole! Suddenly I saw Ellis for what he was: a heartless jerk on a power trip, driving through a snowstorm just to prove that he was in charge. He’d made up his mind, and nothing I said or did could change it.

I felt like my head was going to explode, like one of those old Warner Brothers cartoon characters. I grabbed the door handle.

“Let me out!”

“Ivy.”

“I’m serious, Ellis. Let me the fuck out of this car.”

I cracked the door open, and a blast of cold air came in, along with sheet of fresh snow. The snow blanketed my lap, my legs and most of the floor.

Ellis reached across me, the car swerving, and closed the door.

“Are you trying to get us killed?”

God knows, I wasn't trying to get us killed. I just wanted out. Out of this stupid car, this stupid trip, this stupid relationship. Ellis obviously wasn't the person I'd thought he was. He was a fucking prick. He didn't want a girl friend – or God forbid, a wife – he wanted a plastic blow-up doll to sit obediently in the car seat next to him.

I bent over and sobbed. The world had never known such disappointment, such misery. I was crying for my poor miserable body, for my frozen fingers, my wounded pride, my flawed exit. But mostly I was mourning for the couple that had started out bright and expectant in New York City just a few hours earlier.

Then I felt the car decelerate. Ellis was pulling over to the side of the road. I didn't stop howling until we were at a complete standstill. Ellis was stroking my hair.

“Okay,” he said.

“Okay what?”

“We'll go back. To the motel.”

I didn't see how. It was too slick and narrow to pull a U-turn. There was no exit in sight, probably for miles. But Ellis threw the car in reverse. He rested his arm on the back of my seat, and looked back in the direction of the rear window. Which, of course, was completely covered with snow.

“Wait.” He jumped out and wiped the back window with the sleeve of his coat.

It didn't stay clear very long, but Ellis managed. I stopped sniffing and sat straight up as the car made its way backwards. I was still afraid that we'd be hit from behind. If we died because of this maneuver, it would be my fault.

Finally, we reached the motel. It was dark. Not a light on anywhere, not a car in the parking lot. Now we could see what the place was called, the Cloverleaf Motel, but clearly its “NO VACANCY” hadn't been turned on for years.

“Now what?” I said.

Ellis got out. He walked across the parking lot and started trying doors. He moved methodically, starting at the far left. Finally, two rooms from the end, the door budged.

I didn't have to be coaxed. I bolted out of the car and stood next to Ellis. We hesitated, not knowing what to expect – rats, skeletons, Jimmy Hoffa, a feral cat – and then advanced slowly. The room was black, and

as cold as the car. But it had what it was supposed to have: a bed. The windows weren't broken. Snow wasn't coming in. Best of all, it wasn't moving.

"Okay," Ellis said. "You stay here. I'll get a flashlight."

I waited, not liking the darkness, but not sure I'd like what the flashlight revealed either.

Ellis came back and led me to the bed. "Wait," I said, brushing the snow to the floor. He tucked me in, put his coat over me, covered me in the blanket, then looked in a dresser drawer and found another one. "I'll be back," he said. I heard the sound of breaking glass, and then Ellis returned with two more blankets.

He got in bed next to me, rolled on top of me and with the weight and heat of his body, I began to thaw. I didn't think I would be able fall asleep, but I must have, because I woke up the next day to discover that the world was again filled with light. The blinding light that comes the morning after a snow.

It was Thanksgiving.

Ellis was looking at me, tenderly, his left index finger tracing my lips.

"Ellis, I'm sorry."

"Shhhh."

"But—"

"Let's get going."

He took some of the blankets, draping them on me for the car ride to Sheba's. It was still ridiculously freezing in the Mustang. But as it turned out, we were only about 45 minutes away.

We got to the house, which was nothing the way I had imagined, not Frank Lloyd Wright at all, but an ordinary white former farmhouse, very small. They had heard the car pull up, and all came to the door – Sheba, Sheba's husband Harold, Ellis's brother Paul, Paul's wife Julie, their little daughter Kirsten. There was a rush of introductions, kisses, laughter. "We were worried," Julie said. "We kept calling the highway patrol, to see if there were any accidents."

Sheba backed up slowly, deliberately, to take my full measure – and they all made way for her. She was a tall woman with raven hair, save one white streak that swept back from her forehead, Cruella deVil style. She inspected me head to toe, and I knew I looked like a wreck, Cinderella after the clock struck twelve. Was I supposed to curtsy? There was a collective intake of breath, as everybody waited. Even Kirsten.

Ellis finally broke the silence. "Mom," he said, putting his arm around me. "Meet my fiancée, Ivy."

