

Greg Cohen  
POB 630158  
Lanai City, Hawaii 96763  
[gcacme@wave.hicv.net](mailto:gcacme@wave.hicv.net)

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### What A Heavy Rain Can Do

The front door opened with a satisfying break of the seal. A silver-haired woman displaying an elegantly-cut black dress escorted a young couple out as far as the porch roof extended. The young man stepped out into the rain, looking up at the sky. The woman hugged his thin, blonde companion for a long moment, holding the girl's shoulders and speaking in a low, confidential voice.

"Amy. You can't fool me...I've loved you for too many years not to know when my special girl isn't happy."

Amy's voice splintered in tones of hurt and anger, speaking in a calculated louder volume. "It's gotten so I stay awake nights knowing something has to change but it's not as easy as *that*." She snapped her fingers sharply.

The patter of light rain rendered the darkness less lofty. The porch lights of this, one of the oldest houses in the exclusive subdivision gleamed about her with false reassurance. Raindrops became shimmering, angled lines in the added glare from genuine streetlights mounted on the garage. Her mother spoke again, reassurance warming her low voice.

"Well I understand, my dear. You can't live with them and you can't live without them...but I think if you looked yourself in the eye you'd see it's just time you were without for awhile...Never forget, you're a Crawford. Call me this week and we'll talk."

She addressed Amy's bearded companion indifferently before returning to the house. The couple both turned towards the driver's door of the MG roadster shining in the rain. Amy's voice was thin and annoyed.

"You must be crazy if you think I'm going to let you drive, John."

"Oh come on, I'm not drunk and you know it."

"Then at least you'd have an excuse. Just get in the car, O.K.?"

They stared at each other for a heavy moment and he silently walked around to the other side. Amy unlocked the door, slamming it hard behind her. She started the engine and shook the rain from her hair before reaching over to unlock his side. He got in, closing the door with only a slight click.

"That's how hard these doors should be closed." He said in a dead-pan tone.

"Don't start with me, John. Just don't start."

She threw the car into reverse and backed out into the road without checking for traffic. The gates pulled closed and the garage lights went off, their headlights seeming dimmer for it. The rear wheels spit gravel as she accelerated. When they approached the main road, John turned the radio on and popped in a tape.

Without looking at him, she reached from the gearshift to turn the volume all the

way down, sparing him only the insulting click of turning it off. The tires squealed in the turn as she caught the pavement and John was slightly pitched against the door. He took a long time pointedly adjusting and snapping his seat belt. They were both silent until a red light reduced the diverting sounds of engine and rain. In the suddenly empty space and still without looking at him, she spoke in an even, level voice.

"I don't have to tell you how much you embarrassed me tonight. My dad wouldn't be out of line if he refused to speak to you again. If you'll remember, the main reason we were there was to have him put in a good word for you at The News. I don't know how much more of this I can take, John...I can't help the things we have. And my family worked hard to get them. I couldn't believe you!...that crack about ethics in business was what really did it...He plays golf with Jeff Arnold every week! You don't criticize a man's business *and* one of his best friends who happens to be the most prominent columnist in the city, not while you're sitting at his table."

He was speaking almost before she finished.

"But it's okay for him to sit there and tell me his opinions about my life, is that it? And what do you expect me to say when he justifies that lack of ethics as 'plain business sense' and 'self-preservation'?"

"Grow up. All he was saying is sometimes you do what you have to do."

She pulled onto the freeway and the wind increased inside the convertible top

so they could no longer hear the raindrops on the roof. She cast a sharp glance across the suddenly claustrophobic car at him.

"Besides, they just have my best interests at heart...and they did offer to help. That's more than anybody else has. Not that *your* family has exactly been more than polite to me. Listen..."

"That's just it, Amy. I'm tired of listening. My family may not seem any friendlier because you kind of intimidate them, but they don't talk over you at the table. They'll come around. I'm not Ivy League. I don't have the prep school or college, and your people will always be barely civil to me and indulgent with you, no matter how much time together we have under our belts. I know what they think...or hope. I'm just a phase you're going through. Didn't you know that I '...just don't understand things from the management and distribution point of view.'? That's a quote from your dear father.

"They all ask the same questions in the same damn order: 'Where did you go to school?', then looking into their glass, 'Well, what clubs were you in?'. Then the big clincher, 'So how long have you been seeing Amy?'.

"And tonight. The great retired newspaperman tells me to bring along a resume, my portfolio and maybe a piece of fiction. We got in that den and you know why we were back out in less than fifteen minutes? He took one look at the resume, stared at me above the tops of his glasses and said, 'Advertising, huh? Lots of paste-up experience I imagine?'

"Even then I didn't get defensive. I pointed out that paste-up was a small skill, tried to explain that some work goes into writing a creative and effective radio spot or conceiving a good print ad and he let me go on, but the whole time he had this amused little half-smirk on his face. I stopped and he put the resume away *without even opening* the portfolio. Just wide enough so he could slip in the sheet of paper and not have his high-minded sensibilities sullied by the sight of advertising copy.

"He said, 'Well, the first thing you'll want to do if I get you on at The News is downplay this advertising stuff. You're what...? Twenty-seven, twenty-eight? I thought so. It's important they know at your age, you realize there's a big difference between advertising copy and real journalism.'

"That's all. Interview over. I mentioned I'd also brought two short stories, but he stood up to make sure I knew we were finished and says, 'Oh yes, Amy said you'd been doing something since high school...was it fiction? I thought she said poetry. Well, not much difference between them as far as what money you can hope to make, eh? Now then, you're not above sweeping a few floors to get your foot in the door, I assume?'

"Christ! I'm almost thirty years old and he wants to know if I can see myself sweeping floors."

John stared accusingly at her. She waved her hand in dismissal.

"Oh, that's just Dad...he always gives you a worst-case-scenario. That's how he

tests your resolve. And he's so used to intimidating people from his years running the paper that he doesn't even realize he's doing it anymore. You know what your worst problem is, John? You think too much. You spend all your time imagining what people are thinking. Instead of hearing what they say you're always listening for what they *mean* as if everyone speaks in double-talk or some...oh, hell...Look. They've got the freeway closed."

John nodded and pointed towards an upcoming exit. "They've been paving the northbound side at night. Just get off here and we'll cut across on Santa Fe."

"I don't want to go down there, John. Not at this time of night. It's too spooky."

"What do you mean, 'spooky'? It's the old highway, that's all. Four lanes in good shape, it just doesn't have streetlights. Besides, what can happen to us in a car going sixty miles an hour? If you get off on Broadway we'll have to go through downtown and it'll take an extra forty minutes just to get to your place. Then I still have to drive home. C'mon, take Santa Fe."

She exited at the next ramp and moments later they were wheeling down a wide, dark stretch of road. A railroad track built up on a 12-foot embankment ran parallel on their right, a dark, bulking mass pierced only by the occasional tunnel breaks for cross-traffic. Amy's side was littered with fast food restaurants, gas stations, X-rated book stores with no windows and by-the-hour motels advertising waterbeds and in-room VCR's. Yet in the dark, their lights seemed warm and almost inviting compared to the stretches of vacant lots that lay

between them like expanses of unexplored moonscape. As the little car sped into one of the pitch-black zones, a figure resolved in the headlights' beam on the right. Amy was doing close to seventy and let off the gas instinctively. When they came even with the hitchhiker the car was still moving swiftly but her mind snapped a quick impression.

Aside from the thumb extended pleadingly, Amy registered a round, plain, pale face beneath a circling shock of frizzed brown hair. On the ground was a box or suitcase. Through all that at high speed even, was another perception, clearer than the rest and she spoke it out loud as she swung the wheel over and stepped on the brake.

"That was a woman. Out here at this time of night."

She looked at John and asked, "You don't mind, do you?"

In the decisive moment all traces of their argument left the car. He smiled that easy, understanding smile that had attracted her to him in the first place, shook his head 'no' and looked around to see if the rider had reached the car yet.

"Everything happens for a reason." He said brightly over his shoulder, glancing back through the rain. She realized it was at times like these that it was easy to love him. With his eyes gleaming at the prospect of breaking from patterns, at every chance to take a little chance, it made her feel close to him. The realization of how long it had been since she'd had that feeling was a physical pain then. Amy turned to look out the foggy plastic rear window and got the

impression of a slow-walking, heavy-set animal. Like a rhino would move, she thought, thinking John would have to squeeze into back. She glanced out the front window, was conscious of the clear gleam of the gauges, the glow of tape deck lights, the stretch of pavement in front of them and the dim orange line painted to mark the shoulder of the road.

She heard footsteps on the gravel and then the radio crackled white noise. They both looked around, knowing the volume was off. Hovering over the gearshift, a few inches from the console was what, in the later telling, they could only describe as '...a rip in the air.'

Amy looked at John and his eyes said he saw it, too. It was as if some transparent hand had slipped into an invisible pocketful of bright jewels or even fire itself, and in the reaching, released a blaze of light from the thin opening. The tiny car seemed about to burst with a kind of presence and they both sensed the air grow thinner and charged. The acrid scent of ozone startled them and John blurted out, "Go, Amy. Go!"

But as he was breathing in to form the first syllable, she'd felt it too, reacting to an overpowering urge to escape, to run, to fly as fast and far as she could. His words sounded as if they were being played back in slow motion so by the time he'd finished speaking, she was already into second gear. They were less than a mile away when she pegged the speedometer at the top end so the needle was bouncing crazily but she pressed even harder on the floor with the accelerator

pedal. Her heart was pounding, she'd broken out into a sweat and knew if she dared let up on the gas, her leg would start shaking of its own accord. She looked over at John. He was so pale she could make out his every feature and the deep, curious look in his face as he stared at the spot in mid-air. She was struck by the pure-white of his knuckles where he gripped the frame of the open wing window. They locked eyes for a moment before she looked back to the road. Then as if at a pre-arranged signal, it all ran out of them and everything slowed down.

Amy put the car in neutral. Her hands unlocked slowly around the steering wheel, her right leg was solid pins and needles. John shook his head, running his hands through his hair as if he'd just woken up. They coasted under an overpass and beyond it, the street was lined with lights. At the beginnings of traffic, Amy shifted back into gear and pulled off into the parking lot of the first bar. They just sat for a few moments, staring forward blankly, oddly comforted by the steady ticking of the car, the swish of passing traffic and the dim echo of music that escaped from the building whenever someone went in or out.

They tried to get out of the car once, but their legs were too unreliable and with small, nervous laughs and sighs, they waited for a few more moments, massaging their muscles and stretching. Steadying both of them was the unspoken thought that the car had performed well. Some of their best times together had been when he started restoring the MG and she'd surprised him

with her knowledge of auto mechanics, experience naturally acquired as a tomboy with six older brothers.

It was through Stephen, the youngest and closest of her brothers that she'd met John in the Spring. During lunch one day, Stephen said he'd sold the last of his MG parts but had to drop them off to a guy on the way back to the house. Amy smiled remembering the look on John's face when she'd shown him how to adjust the twin carburetors which he'd fiddled way out of synch.

They wound up spending the afternoon and she'd never met a man who liked cars but was indifferent to sports, living among walls of books and records. Stephen had given him a hard time about not having a TV until John finally relented and turned on the radio so her brother could catch the days' scores. While Stephen was cheering for the Red Sox, John had asked her out and she'd said 'Yes'.

The timing had seemed right. She had been far enough away from The Tennis Player to cleanse herself and know loneliness again. At first she'd thought it cold to label him by his occupation but in the end he'd been little more than that. NTLA is what they had called boys like that in school: "Nice To Look At". Recently she'd found herself worrying that someday she might remember John only as "The Writer", or after tonight, more aptly "The Jerk".

At some point in their growing closeness, she could suddenly see years ahead to a moment when she might be sitting over a cup of tea, or walking in the rain,

and point to the exact day and conversation when she knew she was in love with him. Yet these last few weeks all she could feel was how he'd begun to harp on little things about herself that she took for granted. He could launch into a lecture concerning how many people in the world would give anything to have half of what she did if Amy so much as left a little food on her plate, God forbid that she should use a charge card to buy something nice for herself.

She wondered why she was always attracted to one or two facets in a man, only to wind up disappointed when they turned out to be just that...caricatures, people whose singular strong side held its power because that's all there is in their lives...if she heard him cheerfully say, "Live Simply So Others May Simply Live." one more time she was certain she'd throw up. When she'd pointed it out to him, he'd smiled that devil-may-care grin and said, "You should be glad I hate bumper stickers.", and their argument had dissolved in laughter, though he'd had to force a smile when she'd said that sometimes she felt as if she were dating one of the twelve Apostles.

From the carefree summer days when he'd turn the tape deck way up as she raced the car into the mountains where they pursued secluded lovemaking, the end of a long winter now found them driving more often than not with the music off because they were arguing or simply couldn't bear a note of cheeriness in the air. Those silences had been almost as deep as what they were suspended in the bar's parking lot.

Amy noticed that the hair on the back of John's neck was still standing up. When they walked in and took a booth, she remembered a song about a hitchhiker picked up by a trucker named Phantom Joe. Everyone in a diner goes stone silent on the hitchhiker when he mentions Phantom Joe, and he gets the legend then, of a man and a big rig who perished on the road years before so children in a school bus might live. There wasn't a head in the room that didn't turn when they entered, as if everyone knew they could chill the company with a strange story of their own.

In her first year of college, Amy had experimented with hallucinogens. After peaking, they would often get someone 'straight' to drive them around or to a diner for cokes. They'd go off in these profound, insightful talks about The Nature of Things until her best friend, Judy, would look around at all their dilated eyes and fixed grins and say, "High time in the old town tonight, eh girls?" and they'd all burst out laughing. At those times, it had seemed impossible for people to not know they were operating on another level.

Now the sense of seeing from another plane or dimension was as strong or stronger as it had ever been under LSD or mescaline. They both ordered double shots of brandy and downed them quickly, without a word. When they reordered the same again, the waitress, a thin woman with dense crow's feet around pinched, worried eyes said, "Are you kids alright?" She wore a reflective tag that said "Velma" on it in script letters. They both smiled and Amy replied,

"We just had a close call on the old highway, but we're okay."

The woman smiled solicitously. "I thought so! I told Charlie, that's my husband Charlie behind the bar, when you walked through that door, I said 'Something's not right with them, Charlie.' Well in that case, this round's on the house. Damn crazy drivers make me afraid to get in the car when we leave here at night. I've seen 'em run that red light out front after midnight bold as brass! You can't be too careful. How 'bout if I put on a fresh pot of coffee for you, too? My father always used to say nothing clears the nerves like a good strong cup of coffee."

They tried to decline but she was persistent. When Velma brought the coffee, she said, "Say, where'd you kids get sunburned this time of year? Are you skiers?" They answered in confused silence. She gave them a long, serious look and went over to whisper to Charlie behind the bar. They looked at each other closely for the first time, then at their reflections in Amy's compact mirror. The left side of John's face, the right side of Amy's both bore the rosy glow of a sunburn. After that, they sipped their coffee silently, Velma announced last call and they made their getaway behind two other couples.

They were both dead on their feet now. Amy fought a heaviness throughout her body, noticing that the muscles in her right leg and wrist ached. She handed John the keys and he pulled out of the lot, gaining speed slowly. He switched the stereo off and they both watched for a brief second to verify that the power light

went out as if the whole time they were in the bar, a buried part of their minds had been hoping that the phenomena could be blamed or explained through the electronic unit or something else in the dash, but all was discouragingly normal. It was raining heavily now and the wipers clicked steadily on high. John looked at her with a gentleness in his eyes.

"Tired?" He asked sympathetically. She nodded.

"Me too," he said. "But it's like just my body is tired. I can't seem to shut my brain off...I already know I'll have trouble getting to sleep."

All Amy could feel was how strongly the sense, the idea of getting out of there had possessed them. All she could see was that slit in the universe. That part was crystal clear, but she failed when trying to recall images of the hitchhiker. She closed her eyes to concentrate but the vertigo from casting about in her mind made them wink open immediately. John said, "Feel like talking?"

She hoped he didn't want to go back to the argument. It was faraway and small and the last thing she wanted to get into now. She shook her head weakly.

"Not really. I'm just drained...and still confused. Did you really see it?"

"You mean that light? Is that what you saw?...like a seam of light right...there." He placed his index finger precisely at the spot in mid-air. She nodded, feeling charged again by his confirmation. "Johnny, what do you think it was?"

"About all I know for sure...and I don't know why I'm so sure, is whoever or whatever that was on the road, it didn't mean us well."

"Yeah, me too...and like someone reached through from some other side or place to change..."

"...to change events. I thought that too! I'll tell you one thing...we used up an awful amount of luck tonight, Amy. An awful lot." He shook his head and looked her in the eye.

"Y'know, I'm sorry about tonight. I was an idiot. But god, when he cut me off in the middle I just lost it..."

She sighed. Not only didn't she feel like this, but they'd had the same conversation too many times. He could be so sweet and sensitive too, seeing every point where he had gone wrong, every mis-spoken word in the fateful moment.

"John, he's twice your age. Of course he's going to talk down to you..."

"But that's not fair. My father never talks down to anyone."

"Well, my father always said you can waste a whole life looking for fairness in this world. And did you ever stop to think that not talking down to anyone might be why your father is still managing a restaurant instead of owning one?"

She said it without cruelty, but it was spoken with the speed and summation of a subconscious observation that's never as clear as when first voiced. Amy looked over to see his face tense, felt the car accelerate slightly.

"Be careful, Johnny. It gets really slick going down this hill."

"Oh great! First you're telling me why my father is a failure and now you're

going to tell me how to drive, too...listen Amy..."

He turned his head to emphasize his point and she knew he didn't see that even though there was a green light for them, the pick-up truck in their lane wasn't moving. Her foot pressed for a brake pedal that wasn't there as she cried out and he looked back. She felt the brakes grab and the sickening slide of the car on the gleaming pavement, was conscious of his sharp intake of breath as he spun the wheel this way and that against the skid. Amy heard the chug-chug of the feathered brake pedal but knew it was too little, too late and braced for the sickening shriek of metal against metal.

When they came to a full stop she opened her eyes, saw that the pickup wasn't damaged at all. The low car had slid beneath its rear bumper. The slightly bent chrome trailer hitch was plowed about a foot into the formerly graceful curve of the hood. Both headlights were simply gone, the front fender edges crumpled like origami paper. A small white cloud of steam escaped in ghostlike wisps and the traffic light winked ironically back to red. John was slumped in his seat with his eyes wide open, just staring down. He leaned forward and rested his head against the wheel. His voice was hollow and crushed.

"Christ...what is going on tonight?" He looked at her with shame, frustration and fear in his face. "I've wrecked our baby."

Lost for a reply and battling a mixture of fear, pity and disgust, Amy climbed out and walked forward. She heard John's door close, his footsteps on the other

side of the car. The driver of the truck, a bent old man wearing horn rims was surveying the damage. He looked up at John.

"Gee, I'm sorry young fellah. First gear sticks in this old bus sometimes. We always say she has a mind of her own. I just couldn't get it going. Doesn't look like you did any harm to her, but I'm sure sorry about your car..."

They all stood looking at the mournful, mangled front of the MG, the pool of antifreeze and oil like blood spilled on the pavement. Amy saw tears come to John's eyes and he walked away towards the back of the car. The police and a wrecker showed up simultaneously and everyone was kindly sympathetic to them, even the cop who took the report and apologized for having to give John the ticket for following too close.

The ride home sitting squeezed up against the window of the wrecker with John in the middle, laconically responding to the driver's attempts to cheer them up was the most suffocating and endless time she'd ever endured. When they pulled up in front of the apartment, John walked her to the door. She spoke first.

"Quite a night, eh?"

He gave her a rueful half-smile. "Amy..."

"No, don't."

"But...what are my chances of apologizing to Big Mike?"

She smiled a smile she didn't feel. "Don't worry about it now, okay? Just go home and try to get some sleep."

"I'll call you in the morning, OK?"

She couldn't bring herself to say 'yes', but she didn't manage 'no', either, just turning away to fit her key in the door.

The sight of his lowered head in the cab of the wrecker, the sad, up slung shape of the MG rolling piteously along behind brought a catch into her throat and she realized she was crying. Once inside, she took a shower and drank a cup of tea in the dark, staring out at the rain. She wanted to listen to the rain for awhile, but all she could hear was the traffic cop's deep voice saying he understood what a heavy rain can do. She remembered reading somewhere that water was the symbol for the unconscious. The image of gleaming streets sliding crazily beneath her returned, and on its' heels the burned-in sight of that rent in the air inside the snug MG. She cozied the blankets up close, remembering what John had said about everything happening for a reason. A moment later, she pitched the covers back, walked over to the phone with the firm idea of unclicking the plug from the wall. If she talked to him tomorrow at all, it would be at her own choosing.

But at that instant, the phone rang and she reached in the dark for the receiver. "Hello, Mother." She got her father's blustery laugh in response.

"Not a bad guess, daughter. Do you have company?"

Amy smiled grimly. "You must not have talked to mother after we left."

She could just imagine her father broadly smiling, heard the familiar creak as

he leaned back in his leather chair, recognized the slight snick as he clipped off the end of a cigar. She could hear smoke and whiskey in his voice.

"I just wanted to tell you, daughter, that fellow of yours is made of pretty sturdy stuff. I'm sorry if I seemed too hard on him, but I had to know who I'd be sending in to see Mike Rose with my stamp of approval."

"Don't tell me he didn't get you mad with that crack about Jeff Arnold, Daddy."

"Hell, Amy. He was right! Jeff's a pompous ass at work and he's even worse out on the golf course, but he and I go back fifty years! It's just been a long time since anyone talked back to me, and at my own dinner table to boot." She was silent at this.

"I thank you for your enthusiasm", he said ironically.

"Oh Daddy, I just...you know what Mother thinks about him, and..."

"In matters of the heart, my dear, what your mother or I think shouldn't matter a damn. Does he make you happy?"

"He used to...but lately, it seems like we're both working too hard to turn each other into someone else...does that make sense?"

She heard a long exhale of smoke, and in a confidential voice, her father said, "Well daughter, if you're both working that hard, it sounds like maybe you've got something that would be strong once you get it forged. The best couples I know are those where the two people are very different except in the important

things that count. I see him making you more streetwise, more aware and practical and God knows you need it. Too much of your mother in you, there. What you give him is class, style and a dose of a different kind of reality. But here's the sixty-four thousand dollar question: You feel like you bring more to the party than he does, don't you?"

After a long pause, Amy said, "Yeah, I guess I do. It's not really fair is it, to expect that people will get more from a relationship than they give, no matter if they give their all?"

"All I can tell you is this. Whether you're right or wrong about that, I don't know. But regardless, if there was any one goddamned lesson I ever wanted you to learn it's this...sometimes life isn't about what you get, daughter. It's about what you give...and on that note, I'll say goodnight now. Call me tomorrow if you want to."

Amy hung up the phone gently, staring out the window. She turned the light out and settled back under the covers. She awoke to sunlight that belied all the darkness of the night before with the telephone ringing and she knew it was John. Glad that the moment was forced upon her, she told him that when she'd come in from the tow truck, she'd planned to leave the phone unplugged, but had wound up pulling it closer to the bed. And then she told him why.