

1976

Back Road

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The petunias along the walk border were at their best this year, fatties in lavender ruffles. The nasturtiums, never so large, blazed like small bonfires in their row of green foliage. The lawn, newly cut, was soft and shaded like plush. Paul sat at the wheel in the driveway waiting for his wife to take a final flick at her makeup. He was watching a squirrel that grappled with a nut at the edge of the drive then streaked up the trunk of a magnificent poplar with all its leaves twinkling in the sun. Had there ever been such a summers as this! Only in childhood. Only in the long, hot and lazy summer of Penrod, maybe. Rains at night to freshen the morning. Sun all day and red sunsets. It was a rare reward for a lifetime of northern winters."

Cover Page Footnote

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By Jean Walrath

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Suddenly he was restless. Women! Why is it that the female invariably does her damndest to ruin a good day with her fussing. What could have been a peaceful, blissful weekend at their house in the hills was instead to be a party with ten guests and Lord knows how much commotion over the food, linen, blankets. Joan would have a notebook filled with lists of what to do, what to buy. The best part of this day will be shot before we get there. She will never understand, Paul reiterated angrily, that what a man is entitled to have — a man

who has been talking to people all week long — is a quiet time out to listen to the crickets and the tree frogs and kick through the dead leaves in the woods. To hell with social "obligations". He glanced at the car clock and switched on the radio to make sure he had correctly heard the earlier weather report: a ten percent chance of showers. The weather man said it again, and Paul snapped him off.

Joan emerged from the house with a couple of small baskets and a blanket on one arm, a pad in one hand and a pencil in the other. She stopped to consult her notes. "I thought I had forgotten the tomatoes," she called out, "but I didn't. Oh, dear, I can't remember about the oysters. How many did I order? Oh yes, it's here. We'll pick them up at the last stop. I phoned. They're frozen."

She placed the baskets in the trunk, counted the items already deposited — casserole, ice bucket, salad greens, chocolate cakes. All there. That part of the ritual of planning, cooking and packing was done. She closed the trunk, glanced down at her white slacks, brushed at an imagined smudge, then swept a farewell inspecting glance at the house, eased into the seat beside Paul, and they were off.

In an hour or so he would be a frog in a pond, smelling the sweet water, drinking the sweet air, and croaking for a beer. "There should be a good crop of blackberries at the edge of the mea-

dow," he reminded Joan. He remembered his mother making blackberry jam. And pies! He could see her cooking at a stove where the view was a thicket with goldfinches flying as they chortled. Merry little birds.

"We have stops to make," announced Joan.

Paul groaned inaudibly. She had yanked him out of his reverie. "How many?"

"Two I think will do it. The ice cream at Hackett's and oysters at the market."

"The shade will be over most of the pond before we get to the hills," he complained. "I haven't had a good swim in the sun yet this summer."

"Don't blame me. It's such a confusion when you have to go down to your office on Saturday morning. There are things that have to be packed at the last minute, and when I don't know when you'll show up, I get all unglued."

"It's the same every time. Business is business. You can't measure in minutes how long it will take to deal with a client."

"But why Saturday? Other lawyers don't work on Saturday."

"We have to go through this again!" His voice rose. "I might ask why it is that you have to choose Saturday and Sunday for the time to fill up our retreat with shouting, shrieking, drinking and gorging guests!"

"When do you suggest we have parties? Mondays, I suppose. Preferably

Monday mornings."

"Never! That's when! I hate people! When are you going to hear me. *I hate people!*"

"You hate people! Since when? You, the number one extrovert of the Four Corners lunch club. I have to laugh."

Joan's chin went up. She was trembling. "And where do I fit into the passion of yours for nothing but peace?"

"You've got all week for seeing everybody you call friends at lunch, or golf, or ceramics lessons or any damn thing."

Joan slapped down her note pad. She spread her strong, lean and tanned fingers across her knees and studied them. She was wearing an enormous brown ceramic ring with silver mounting that she had made in class. It was handsome with her brown sandals and brown leather bag. She had dressed so joyfully a few minutes ago. Now! Yuck! She flashed a side-glance at Paul. His lips were forced into a hard pencil line, the graying bristle of hair below his temples she had thought so handsome after his latest trip to the barber she now thought hideous and she hated the strong line of his nose. She looked down at the gray-checked slacks that were all wrong for the country and quietly snorted. He liked them. They were comfortable. How could he be such a son of a bitch?

"Weather man says there is going to be rain," Paul offered at last.

"So what? The day is ruined anyway."

Paul's eyes were on the traffic ahead.

"Supermarket's busy," he remarked.

The word *market* sparked a new contact between her and her list. She picked up her pad, checked and sighed. Even if she had thought of something she needed, she wouldn't have asked him to stop. Not for anything.

Beyond the traffic knot they were out on the open highway. All that broke the steady whoosh, of passing cars was the piercing squawl of an ambulance siren. Flashing past, the vehicle zoomed over a low hill ahead and dove out of sight.

Now that they had left the city, Paul's peevishness gave way to pleasure at the woods and the sweep of horizon. It was release from pavements, buildings, walls, dirt — and people. The fields were bleached from hay cutting and the oats were ripening for early harvest. "Wheat harvest is pretty much over," he said, addressing Joan's side view. Her per-

fectly trimmed head was fixed straight ahead. She was lovely, Paul had to admit, looking particularly crisp and attractive in her browns and new whites. Her amber eyes stared into a distant nothing.

"Let's turn off," Paul said, swinging to the right from the six-laner into his favorite road.

"It's longer," protested Joan.

"There's more to see."

"No houses. Nothing. It's a bore." Joan dipped into her handbag for a scarf, tied it on carefully and resumed her marble statue pose.

"How come we're having oysters when I don't like them?"

"I believe in being festive." She paused. "And who cares what you like?" It came out through clenched teeth.

Paul shrugged. The back road had changed since last weekend. The day lilies were gone with the last of the daisies. The roadside was spattered with the blue, white and yellow of chicory, hawkweed and wild carrot. The foliage of early summer, toughening, had taken on a darker green. The far vistas were cultivated fields of potatoes and beans. Soy beans were bushing out, the pods growing plump. There was a small grove with emerald grass along a brook and trees with black trunks. Wild grape vines with heavy foliage were draped over fence posts. A sumac bush was showing pink.

"It's getting on," Paul said, lost again in the fascinations of the countryside, and talking aloud to himself. "I hate to think about it ending. I hate to think about fall getting even one red leaf into the door." He squinted upward. "The weather forecast could be right. Look at those clouds." Surrounded by the light of a summer day, some clouds to the south had gathered into a mass steeped with two thunderheads. The air was heavy and Paul touched the air-conditioning switch. He rolled up the window and cool air blew through the vents.

"Wondered when you'd think of that," said Joan. "If I melt it doesn't matter. So long as you can catch the breezes of the wide-open spaces."

"Come off it, Joan," Paul said tiredly. Suddenly he tensed. "What's going on?" Lights were flashing in the stubble of a hayfield and at the road edge

several cars were parked.

"It's an ambulance."

Incongruously pitched forward in the sloping field and up to its hubs in the grass was a red and white sheriff's car and beside it the ambulance that had gone wailing past them on the highway.

"What's happened?" Joan demanded, craning. "Oh, but we're not going to stop," she wailed impatiently. "We can't. We'll be late."

"Just for a minute," said Paul. "I'm curious."

He pulled the car off the road a few hundred feet beyond the parked cars and rolled down the window. It was quiet. Very quiet. In the distance voices on the police radio were too faint to make out what they were saying. "Something on the ground," Paul announced. "Listen! Thought I caught something on the radio about a body. That must be it. What's on the ground is a body."

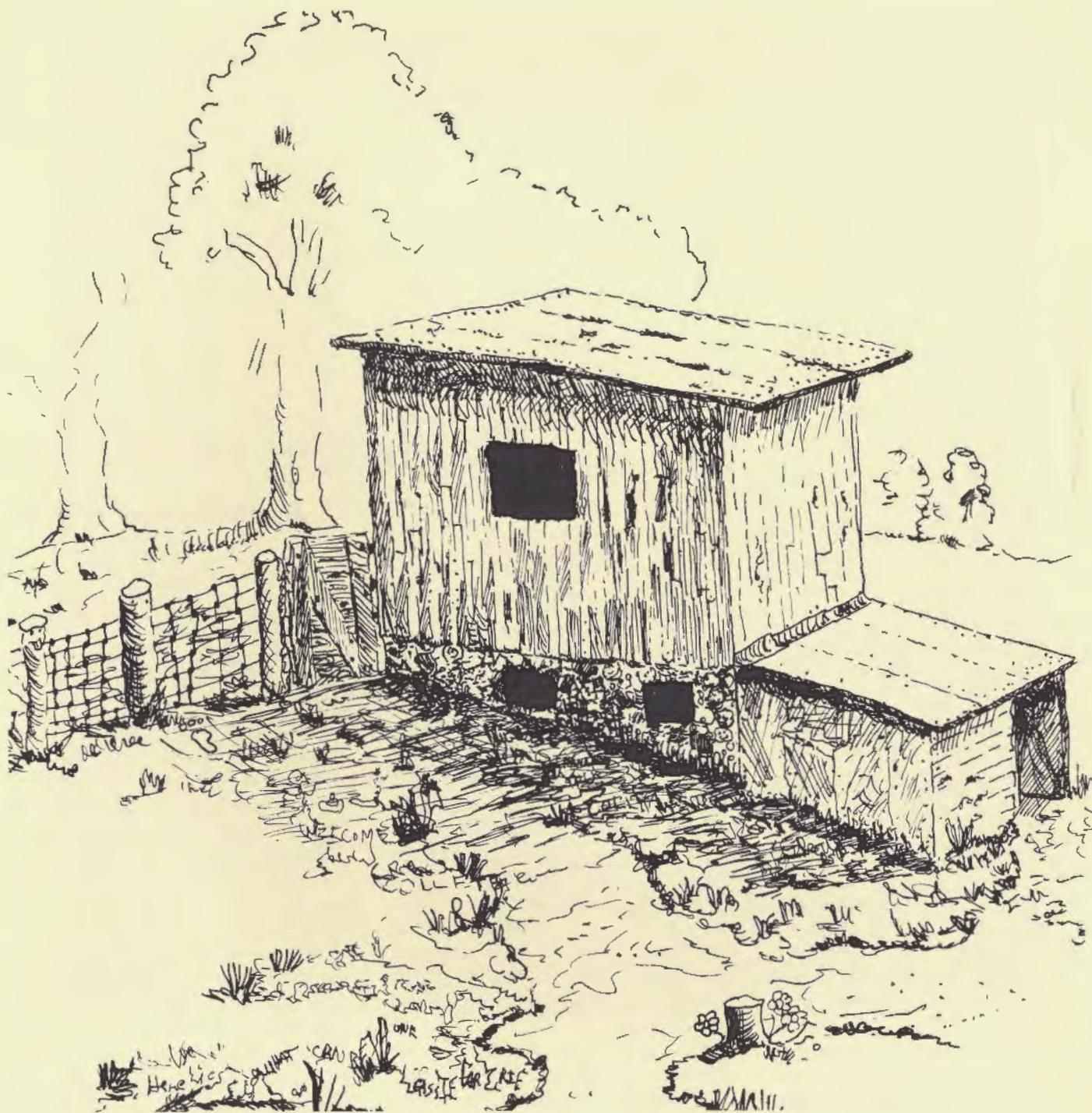
Joan turned in her seat, her eyes met Paul's and widened. "A murder?"

Now the ambulance was driving forward, it stopped, backed up. Two policemen stepped to the rear door. The ambulance driver got out. The sheriff joined them. Some other men on the field simply stood and looked. The scene wore the gray smudged look of a newspaper picture. None of the men was very tall nor very short, nor fat nor lean. Men in a field. Gray men in a field. The two figures at the rear of the ambulance opened the doors and drew out something thick and square and black. It was a folded tarpaulin. They knelt, wrapped the form and lifted it into the vehicle.

"I could see his head," said Joan. "He had dark hair."

The ambulance started up, turned around and headed for the road. The men who had been standing walked to their cars at the roadside. The man in the sheriff's patrol car wrote in a big notebook. In a few minutes the whole cortege had moved away. A lone figure walked down the road toward their car. He probably owned the field and had strolled over to see what was the matter. He passed the couple and nodded. Paul asked if there was anything anybody could do. Could he give the farmer a lift?

"There's nothing," the farmer said. "The man killed himself with his own gun, hunting woodchucks. An acci-



dent." He walked on, silhouetted against a mist. The hills ahead, so green and blue, were now flat stripes of grey and black. The sky had come down like smoke around them.

"That man just minutes ago was alive!" Paul shook his head. A beautiful day like this! He looked around. The sky was dull but only an hour ago this was a dazzling world. The man was celebrating a summer's holiday as he himself might have done, walking through a field fragrant with weeds toasting in the sun. But without a gun. He had never

understood the sport of taking life from small creatures.

Joan's mournful eyes joined Paul's gaze at the ghostly field. "He didn't look very old." There was a single sound. A crow in the trees at the edge of the field cawed lonesomely.

"See what I see on the windshield?" Joan nodded.

It was raindrops, only a few, hardly large enough to count. Paul started the car and they drove on, wordless for a long time.

"Along here it looks like an early fall," Paul noted. "The elderberries are al-

ready turning purple."

Joan had lost her list. She searched the seat behind her, peered at the floor and then found it in her handbag.

They drew up to the village market where she was to pick up the oysters. "I can go in and get them for you," Paul offered.

"It's okay," she said. "I'm half out of the car." She was back in seconds.

It was five miles farther when she remembered. The ice cream!

They looked at each other.

"Forget it," she said. "We've got cake."