

Car Talk

by Ann Bogle

Bella asked me to do this, when we kissed at parting and said, “love you,” she said, “write this when you get home,” and I laughed, and I said, “I never know,” and she said, “do it,” so I pretended I'd think about it but really I was thinking about getting the car out of the tight spot in the lot. I walked on stilts to the car and realized I had been right to worry. I had drunk a Kettle One martini with olive juice spilled in it, “dirty,” as good as Thomas Moore's in Houston, martinis he lost his job icing too long, a real waiter who could mix. I forgot and it boosted my driving morale that I had drunk three small glasses of champagne at the boutique before we went to dinner with the other women. I turned on the motor and started inching the Infiniti FX35 2005 out of the spot. A helpful silver fox stopped to guide me, three times forward and three times back: Why were people nice? Why were men nice? Why were my shoes tall? How could I walk and drive in them? Light blue (“denim”) suede Michael Kors platform sandals and 7 for All Mankind jeans that smoothed and defined curves the Vietnamese brands missed. I mean, I didn't look like myself; I looked like my old self, my twenty-something self, long blond hair, Versace sunglasses. I thanked the silver fox and swung the car out of the lot. Internally I was a crone, and I didn't care what I looked like: an ethic borrowed from my mother who cared about clothes but not hair. It had been Tom at the wharf who strode over to greet me, his friend Tom with the small spectacles standing at the bar. “Write it when you get home,” Bella said. I was wearing the same beads. She was closing her shop to open a shoe salon.

I had gotten test results that day, six months after Tom and I had last had occasion. I didn't know if there had been a reason for all the tests, but the nurse practitioner, a with-it lady with dyed dark hair, had said there was. Everything negative, what you want to hear: hepatitis C, negative, HIV, negative, chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis negative, clean, clean, clean, a 48-year-old virgin in her car,

the car I wrote a check for at Wayzata Nissan. The salesman had been named Jim and still sent postcards. I didn't tell Tom of my cleanliness, let him guess as he had let me. My fiancé was back in the picture, a turn of phrase that was a cliché, something people said not meaning, not imagining a roving-eye camera catching and missing people. I knew he loved me. Tom liked me; it was a lot of tests to like someone who couldn't be trusted, as if because I knew him so well, I *could* trust my fiancé to use a condom if he discovered that he liked someone. He probably trusted me to insist on a condom; he probably trusted me not to like someone that way, to tell him if I did. "I love only you," I proved to him. I could trust him not to use a condom, to confuse spellings of the spectrum illnesses even though he was an ace speller. I could trust the word processor to correct me as much as I needed correction now that I knew my blood was pure of the type A. These thoughts romanced my driving.

Family names. Naegele. Ridder. Bella's and my boyfriends. Naegele the billboard company, Ridder of Knight-Ridder. Naegele I'd read about in *The New Yorker* in a story by Malcolm Gladwell about entrepreneurs. Ted Turner. Ridder had owned the Vikings. Naegele owned the restaurant about which the women complained during the meal. I said the food was good, especially the asparagus. The martini was great; another appeared when one of the women, a summer girl, discovered not liking any martini. I smoked a Nat Sherman on the wharf where Tom found me. Tom and the other Tom whiffed the money when I gestured upstairs to the screened dining porch where the women ate salmon and Juicy Lucy's instead of Monday burgers on the wharf with the men. Boats glided into the docks. I let the men think it: whores. My fiancé's ex-wife used that word to describe me. I knew her finances as she thought she knew mine: she'd given birth to two heirs she raised on Long Island. She'd been to Catholic and city universities and perhaps had heard the word "whore" to describe strangers in her childhood. I first heard the word "whore" out of context spoken by a French-American to mean all men who work for a living. The word gave him teeth, and he bit it crazily. I will not explain years lost to

the subjunctive use of the word at the end of a lost relationship after the boyfriend had pounced, "What do you want to be a?" then the word like a brick to a glass evening, as if Jesus had flown in the back window and out his mouth. I said, "Jesus would forgive me, but I forgot to change." I couldn't stop crying for a day and lost weight. Self-help readers quoted Marianne Williamson "like hitting the devil in the forehead" as if I were the devil and hadn't read her book.

I rely on thongs. Do you say thong panties or thong bikinis or just weekend? I used to hate the word "panty," hate to wear thongs, but then my fiancé started saying "big boy pants" to refer to white cotton briefs I wore under loungewear, full coverage. Grandma pants, I corrected. I plunged the black thong into warm soapy water without removing the card from its hidden back pocket, the card to write my name and address so if I dropped the panties somewhere someone could find their owner, me.

I was here.

