Monster Truck

by Carol Hoenig

Stuck in traffic on the Long Island Expressway, sitting in my '69 Mustang, waiting to move forward. Well, backward really, since I'm returning home. But it's going to be temporary. It *is* going to be temporary, I tell myself as I glimpse the boxes crammed in the back seat from the rearview mirror. Can't really remember what I'd packed, except it's stuff I'd managed to accumulate over the years I'd been away. I cannot imagine bringing it, let alone myself, back into my mother's house for any extended period of time.

Brakes squawk and wheeze from the next lane over. A quick glance and I see the lettering on the side of the van: *Simon's Heating and Air Conditioning*. It isn't one of those monster trucks, the tires gargantuan, still it hovers above me and I feel the driver's eyes gawking down on me.

Maybe he's just admiring the car, my incorporeal therapist suggests.

Since the red Mustang is a thing of beauty, I agree. And, with the original paint job, it was a serendipitous coup with how I acquired it.

It had been a drowsy Sunday morning, but every Sunday morning was drowsy in the Village. I was sharing a loft with people who'd all started out to be strangers, but with only lengths of beads or curtains made from bed sheets serving as flimsy partitions to claimed space, we fast became intimates to each other's flatulence, late-night sighs or fits of rage. In another lifetime the loft had been a shoe factory and I joked how in the dark of night I could hear the ghosts of lost *soles* speaking in *tongues*. There was the rolling of eyes, and when I repeated the joke to my therapist, who was actually sitting across from me, she'd said, “Even though she isn't remotely nearby, I think that was more for your mother.”

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I reminded my therapist how my mother was never remotely nearby, since she was always walking with the Lord high above us mortals.

Anyway, that particular morning, I rolled out of bed, slipped on my sweats and padded across the plank floor. The curtain, a gossamer veil hanging from ceiling to floor, was so thin I could see Stefanos lying in his bed. He was the latest in the long line of tenants, and the most intriguing. He spoke with a hint of a Greek accent and when he talked about the murals he painted for a living, my body turned to gel. I'm a sucker for accents.

Although tempted, I didn't look long enough to see if he was alone and headed toward the kitchen.

“Holy shit,” Stacy said. Her long, lean body, barely garbed in a T-shirt and undies, lay sprawled across the couch, the *New York Times* covering her strategic parts.

Everything in Stacy's life was a drama and I needed caffeine before I could respond.

“Listen to this,” she continued, “nasty divorce, bitter wife. Selling everything. Cheap.”

Jim was sitting at the kitchen table with his own copy of the *Times*. “Where?”

“Classifieds, under the tag sales.”

“No, I mean where's the bitter wife live?”

“Forest Hills.”

Jim recently moved from Maine and didn't know New York all that well. He glanced at me questioningly.

I took a sip of my coffee, then said, “Queens.”

Stacy looked up at us. “Think she's got anything worth checking out?”

“Doubt it,” Jim said, turning the page.

I wasn't in the market for anything except a story for *Day's Notice*, a local rag for which I write a weekly column. Stefanos appeared, sleepy-eyed and disheveled, but alone, and I asked if he'd be interested in joining me.

“Doesn't sound safe,” he said.

“Forest Hills?”

“No. The nasty divorce. Our luck, the husband'll appear with an Uzi and take us all down.”

“You've seen too many Schwarzenegger movies,” I said.

He smiled and seemed to notice me for the first time. “Actually,” he said, “I have to finish the mural for Pastarellis.”

Maybe he saw my crestfallen expression because he added: “They're having a grand opening party next week. Care to be my guest?”

Too quickly I said yes, but it still meant spending Sunday alone.

I caught the subway and walked up the steps and onto the sidewalk, greeted by a glaring sun. The house was only a few blocks away and there was no need to guess which one it was. From a distance, I could see a crowd milling about. As I got closer, I saw candlesticks and picture frames being snatched up at lightning speed. I had little interest in the gold rimmed champagne glasses and was only mildly curious about the CD collection. Off to the side a petite young woman lay stretched out on a lawn chair. There was an opened book on her lap, but with the sunglasses shading her eyes, I couldn't tell if she was reading or surreptitiously surveying the avaricious swarm.

“What size service is this?” a lady, short and solid, called over to the young woman.

She looked up from her book. “Twelve. Never been used.”

The answer didn't seem to satisfy the lady and she began counting the set of silverware.

I moved on, stopping at a down comforter zippered in what looked to be its original casing. A worn chenille bedspread covered my bed back at the loft. I lifted the comforter from the folding table. “How much?”

The woman raised her sunglasses long enough to look, then said, “You tell me.”

I hadn't a clue what to say, but then spotted the original price tag: $349. A voice behind me said, “Ten's been the magic number so far. I wouldn't go over ten.”

“Fifteen?” I said.

Without a moment's hesitation, she said, “Sold,” then reached toward the ground for a glass of iced tea and took a steady sip.

“I told you to say ten,” the voice chastised before moving on.

I dug down in the pocket of my jeans, pulled out a twenty, and started toward the young woman, but she stopped me by pointing. “Just put it in there.” She nodded at a fish bowl on the table. “Make your own change.”

No one would believe this back at the loft. I shoved the twenty in the bowl and felt cheap rooting around for a five, but not cheap enough not to take one and shove it in my pocket.

The crowd grew, the front lawn busy with activity. I watched the young woman, her lack of monetary interest obvious. It was true, too, ten did seem to be the magic number. Before long, the woman still stretched out on the lawn chair, was cleaned out, the crowds gone. I lingered, wondering how to approach her. Lugging the comforter, I wandered over.

“You could've made so much more.”

“That's not what this was about,” she said. She sighed and slammed her book—sculptors of the Nineteenth Century—shut. “Sally.”

“Hmm?”

“My name's Sally.”

The art book, her beautiful eyes and curvaceous body made me grateful Stefanos hadn't come along with me. She strolled to the fishbowl and scooped out the money, cramming it in the pocket of her denim cutoffs.

“Don't you want to count it?”

She shrugged. “I was going to throw everything out, but this seemed more satisfying.”

“Least you're not stuck with anything now,” I said.

Sally lifted her sunglasses, looking toward the driveway where the '69 Mustang was parked.

“That was supposed to be a surprise for his birthday.”

“Nice.”

“For months he wanted it.” She looked at me, paused, then said, “How much?”

“What?”

“How much?”

I laughed a nervous laugh. “You're not serious.”

She nodded, waiting.

I recalled her nonchalance about money. It didn't seem to be the objective for this sale. What the hell. “One hundred.”

“Congratulations.”

I gasped. “You're really serious?”

“This was so cleansing, might as well go all the way with it. Besides, I'm going to Paris, to study, something I should've done before that bastard destroyed---” She nodded at the empty tables. “Can't wait till he hears about all this.”

“How about having him *read* about it?” I pulled my pen and pad from my backpack, then spent the afternoon interviewing Sally for a column I'd titled: *Getting Even, Not Mad*.

And, as simple as that, and with the fury of my friends for not going to Queens that day, I was suddenly the owner of a red '69 Mustang. I was so thrilled I drove it to Long Island to show my Mother, which was a mistake because she thought the color too flamboyant, something a respectable woman shouldn't own. Then, in the next breath, she said, “Well, I won't be around much longer to see it anyway. Praise the Lord.”

How many people praise the Lord for ovarian cancer? I cursed the disease, since it's what drew me back into her world.

Was it the disease or guilt?

On one visit, I pulled the Mustang behind a caravan of cars. I knew by the prodding bumper stickers there were people inside from the Land of Nod—how I refer to the congregates from Mother's church, because no matter what Pastor says, like puppets, they nod in agreement.

I went up the stairs, stood in the doorway, and watched several men lay hands on her supine body, demanding God heal her. Then, once they left, my Mom stretched out her thin arms, bidding me to

come. She whispered, “I've been healed. Praise God, I've been healed.”

“Great,” I said, both not wanting and wanting to believe it.

The next few months, my roommates began to dwindle till there was just Stefanos and me. With so much room between us there was nothing to do but wander into each other's space, then into each other's bed. One evening I let the answering machine pick up so not to lose the opportunity for a liberating explosion. Or, with me clawing at Stefanos back, my legs gripping his, while sinking into myself, would it be an implosion?

While we were entangled around each other, huffing, groaning, an unfamiliar voice broke the rhythm, squelched the implosion.

“Need company?” Stefanos said, still wrapped in the sheets, watching me go through the motions of slipping on my jeans, my boots, while I kept swiping at the tears. Didn't need any therapist to tell me I wasn't crying from what I lost, but more from what I never had.

I didn't answer Stefanos. If he had to ask, well then—Still, during the wake and funeral, I kept thinking of his wide shoulders and how they would've been perfect to cry on, to lean into. Instead of going back to the church basement for cold cuts and salads, I went to the house. I wandered from room to room, grazing a fingertip along the shelves of inspirational books and Bible translations. Absently, I spotted the framed admonition “*As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord*.” Behind the closet door, I winced at the sight of the spare-the-rod-spoil-the-child belt.. I came to the conclusion, the house was a space too big with too many partitions. Besides, how could I leave Manhattan? Stefanos?

I got back to the loft and found Stefanos on the couch, a black-haired beauty curled into him. “New roomie” is how he introduced her.

Immediately, I went into my space and began tossing my stuff into suitcases and boxes the “new roomie” must have just emptied.

So, now here I sit on the LIE, stuck. The wheeze and pneumatic sound of brakes cause me to look up and see the van has moved on

and *Tri-State Concrete and Paving Co*. has taken its place. I look up to see some dusty-looking man staring down at me.

Maybe he's admiring the car.

No, I tell the misguided apparition, he's giving *me* the once over.

Then look away.

I do, but can still feel his eyes pressed on me. I fiddle with the radio, the steering wheel, wishing for the traffic to move.

I'm trapped. But, instead of my therapist, Sally comes to mind.

I lean over, roll down the window and place a gimlet stare on the man's concrete face. "How 'bout it? You and me, right there in the back of that dirtmobile."

His eyes widen, his mouth drops and I roll up the window and fix myself back in my seat, laughing—laughing so hard tears come down my face. Whether he is actually looking any longer, I don't know. But, I don't feel his eyes on me and that's what counts.

I'll make that house of my childhood one wide expanse of space. Down will come the framed admonition and the belt. I'll donate the Bibles to Mom's church.

Just then, the Mustang becomes my own Monster Truck and the car ascends higher and higher, air filling the tires, as I rise above all the obstacles in front of me.

And, one by one, I roll over them, making my way home.