

HIGHWAY DRIVING

“So this is Death.”

Ruth’s chin was perched on top of the steering wheel, eyes straining to pierce the darkness beyond the swirling snow; and now too, past these menacing lights surging toward her. But her world had been reduced to the confines dictated by a howling blizzard, leaving nothing but a few meager yards of rapidly filling ruts that, for the present, was Provincial Highway Number Two.

The glow from the dashboard cast her face in a pale illumination of desperate concentration. Beside her head, suspended by a chord from the rearview mirror, the soft radiance also picked out the phosphorescent pink of a plastic disk. It did not, however, illuminate the words— *Ruth’s Road Demo #1* — stamped on it in large black letters. Although nothing more than a cheap oddity, it was treasured infinitely higher than its face value, and so given that particular place of honour.

The disk had been a gift from Bill; he’d presented it during that too-long-too-short wait at the airport with the other soldiers destined for Kandahar. When that painful time had come to say goodbye, she’d looked down in her palm and noticed he’d slipped it into her hand.

He’d chosen that particular moment with care. His wife’s heavy-footed driving (for that was what *Demo #1* implied) had long been a source of jocular conversation among their circle of friends, so he’d planned this reminder of happier times to forestall her tears. But the ploy had been only partially successful. As soon as she’d read the caption, Ruth brayed laughter, so unnaturally loud in the solemn atmosphere, that it had

drawn attention from the others. Then, while everyone had cheered good-naturedly, she'd burst out crying all the same.

That had been six months ago. Since that day every moment had rippled with an undercurrent of anxiety, waiting for the padre to come to the door, to tell her that all that was good in the world was now gone, lost in a faraway land. Although that call never came, the toll of the waiting had aged her beyond what mere years could ever do. In fact, so heavy was the price that there was a time when she doubted she could ever again answer either door or telephone without dying a thousand deaths.

Yet, although it would never disappear completely, that fear was already fading into something more bearable. The reason was that Bill's unit was due in this very evening, and in her excitement, Ruth was determined that when Master Corporal William Wakefield walked off the ramp at the airport, hers would be the first face his tired eyes would see.

But being December on the prairies, the weather hadn't cooperated. And the army being the army, there'd been a snafu.

CFB Shilo had planned on sending their fleet of long, green buses('Pickles') into the airport at Winnipeg, packed with the families of the returning soldiers to greet them, but it hadn't quite worked out that way.

"Yep," Bill's friend, Sergeant Bean, had called earlier, "We're good to go, Ruthie. Everything's tip-top-toolie here. Plane's coming in at twenty-one hundred, Pickles are leavin' at seventeen hundred. So, you should be here at...say...."

"Three o'clock?"

There followed an offended silence from Roy's end of the line. Try as she might, Ruth had never quite gotten used to the military time system. On the other hand, Roy Bean was Army through and through, and regarded those who displayed anything outside the sanctity of those parameters as a civilian at best, or at worst, a communist.

"Fifteen hundred, I mean fifteen hundred hours," Ruth corrected after some speedy computation.

"Aces and Spades, Ruthie!" Roy was once again cheerful and forgiving, all in the same breath. "Aces and Spades! And if you can find it in your heart to get here a little earlier, maybe spend some time with an old soldier, say...twelve hundred, we might head down to the mess and knock back a few over lunch - do our best to give you that special glow for when he sees you. Whaddaya say?"

Ruth had laughed – she was a bit giddy this morning – and replied noncommittally before hanging up.

For the next few hours she was bubbling with excitement, amazed that it did not explode out of her body like a sunburst. If there was any shadow at all, it may have been a twinge of guilt for feeling so happy. There were others, she knew (some who were friends) who would never experience that peak of joy again; for it had been to their doors that the padre had visited these past months, bearing his grim tidings as would an angel of death, shattering their worlds forever. But she banished the thought for another time. Today was a day of celebration, and nothing could be allowed to interfere.

But then, as though her determination had been a challenge cast at the feet of Fate, a storm front had moved in from nowhere, bringing with it a driving snow and rising wind that grew in intensity with every passing hour. She tried not to worry, yet

when the telephone rang again, she couldn't help the muscles knotting in her stomach. As it turned out, she'd had good reason.

"Ix-nay on the Pickles, Hon." Roy sounded tired and strained, "Old Man Winter ain't cooperatin'. RCMP's closed down Number One."

Number One Highway – the Trans Canada - was the main artery between the base and the airport, two hours away in Winnipeg, and notoriously untrustworthy in winter.

Ruth's spirits, once so high, now plummeted. She'd planned this reunion from the day that Bill first told her he was being deployed. Her special surprise, the expensive negligee she was planning to wear under her coat, already lay on the bed, waiting for her to slip into its wisp-like folds. Now, at the eleventh hour, her dream had been shattered.

Fighting back tears, she hung up the phone, and went to the living room window to confirm what she already knew.

They'd bought their off-base acreage a year ago, shortly after they were married. As a country boy, born and raised on a farm in Saskatchewan, Bill was well-schooled in rural life, but for a city girl from Edmonton, it had all been new for her. Through her husband, Ruth's eyes had been opened to its beauty, and there was plenty of that, far more than she'd ever imagined. But as well as beauty, she was soon apprised that there were also hazards. Their first winter, he'd called her over to that same window where she was now standing.

"Bottom line, Sweetie," he'd pointed to the skeletal windbreak a half mile away. It marked the home of their nearest neighbour, the Olsens, "if you can't see those trees, stay off the road."

When she'd bridled, as he knew she would, Bill had held up placating hands to calm her. "This isn't the city, Ruthie. If I'm away and you get into trouble, you can't bank on the chance there'll be someone around to help. So, promise me," once more he pointed at the distant copse, "if you can't see them, stay put."

He'd gotten his promise, but she hadn't been too happy about it. Docile acceptance had always been foreign to her nature. But in the end she had to understand his need not to worry. In fact, she understood that very well. More than any other factor of being a military wife, she knew what it was to feel that gnawing fear whenever he was off to some dangerous corner of the globe. So, when the winter storms obliterated the peaceful setting of the Olsens from their living room window, she stayed home with some small comfort, knowing she was doing so for her husband's peace of mind.

Now, peering out, Ruth saw nothing but a blinding world of white, as though the Olsens had never been.

It was so unfair! With moistening eyes, she grabbed a cushion and clutched it to her stomach before flinging herself down on the sofa. After all the waiting, after all the stress and fear, it *was just not fair!* She curled into a fetal coil like a wounded animal, and gave in to a tidal wave of disappointed tears.

Minutes passed while she surrendered to her misery, yet eventually, after the initial surge of self-pity, a sober, parent-like thought managed to pierce the din of her frustration. In a no-nonsense tone it reminded her that Bill was coming home, and that he was alive.

Chastened, she felt guilty and childish. She knew there was everything to be thankful for. All that was needed was to wait just a little longer and it would come out

right in the end. Once her husband was back, this disappointment would fade to nothing in the blink of an eye. So, remaining curled on the sofa, she dried her eyes and willed the frustration to fade. Eventually, it lulled her into a fitful slumber.

But of course she couldn't shake her sadness altogether. She'd wanted so badly for that moment to be perfect.

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Now, old timers on the prairies have a saying about the whimsical nature of their climate, and they delight in telling it to any disappointed newcomer they run into: 'Don't like the weather? Just wait five minutes...it's bound to change.' And while Ruth slept, that is what happened.

* * *

When she opened her eyes, the first thing Ruth saw was the dim blackness of the Olsens' windbreak. The second was the clock on the mantel showing five-fifteen.

Roy had told her that the buses had been scheduled to leave at five. She checked outside again. Sure enough, the storm had lessened.

She grappled for the telephone.

"Ruthie?" Sergeant Bean sounded confused, "Are you calling from your cell?"

"No, I'm still at home. I was calling to see if the trip was on again."

There was a long moment of dead air.

"Sweetheart," his tone was telling her to brace for a disappointment, "The trans Canada was opened again. The Pickles left on schedule."

Ire and disbelief cut through her numbness. "And you didn't *call* me?"

Roy was at once both apologetic and defensive. “Ruth, I’m sorry, but it’s been crazy as hell here...”

But she’d already slammed the receiver down, savagely hoping she’d burst his eardrum.

Damn! Damn, and double-damn!

At a distant level she knew that, if she were being fair, she couldn’t blame Roy for the oversight. During all the confusion of trying to get the buses through in the uncertain weather, it was all too easy to forget one person out of hundreds. But, at the moment, being fair was the last thing on her mind. Fuming, she paced about the room like something caged, feeling the renewed surge of her frustration. With one disappointment stacked on top of the other, anything resembling sober council was summarily dismissed.

Then, fatefully, her head awash in desperation, her eyes lit on the coffee table. Splayed carelessly from where she’d dropped them the day before, where the keys to *Demo #1*.

With a sudden stab of hope, she checked the time – twenty minutes past five. Then she peered hard at the Olsens, and thought that she could just see, in the fading light, something that might have been trees.

It would do! She’d drive herself to the airport, and if history was anything to go by, head start or not, *Demo #1* would beat the Pickles hands down.

She raced for the bedroom, slipped into her negligee – hearing threads tear in her haste – pulled on some high-heeled winter boots, grabbed her coat, and was out the door in five minutes.

As a consequence, she didn't hear the telephone seconds later. Nor, forgotten on the kitchen counter, did she hear her cell moments after that. And so she missed Roy's warning that, although open, the highways in her area were still considered extremely hazardous.

Demo #1 started on the first savage twist of the key. She slammed the gearshift into reverse, and by a miracle, escaped getting stuck when the car exploded out of the garage. She wrestled the transmission into first and popped the clutch. Tires spinning, churning the snow to ice, *Demo #1* shot forward, rear end sloughing down the lane, and out onto the gravel.

Her mind had been so full of her desperate need to see Bill that she was well under way before she realized that the storm was much worse than she'd thought – blanketing the road with several inches of snow. Combined with the poor visibility, it was difficult to tell where the gravel ended and the ditch began.

Teeth grinding in frustration, she'd never been able to get past third gear for all of the three miles to the highway, but she told herself that the pavement must surely be better. Almost certainly, the plows would have been down the main roads by now.

She decided to take Number Two instead of One. Although this alternate route wasn't four lanes like the Trans Canada, it was closer and less traveled by semis. Even in her haste, she remembered sobering stories Bill had told her of the mountainous whiteouts that the big rigs left in their wake during these conditions, and how dangerously disorienting it was for the smaller vehicles they passed.

It turned out that the plows had been down after all. When she pulled up to the stop sign at the end of the gravel, she could see the ridges they'd left on the shoulders, but

that had been hours earlier. Now fresh snow lay on the pavement, true, not as deep as on the side roads, and there *were* ruts to follow, but speed, so essential to her plan, would be next to impossible.

Disappointed yet again, she was forced to realize that the intelligent thing to do would be to turn around and go home. But as *Demo #1* nosed out onto the highway, she also realized that turning around without getting stuck had its own problems. She hesitated, then thought of Bill, and made up her mind. Maybe it was clear further on.

In spite of telling herself to be cautious, her foot kept nudging the accelerator until she was dangerously close to losing control. She could feel the hind end trying to swivel and sway, but slowed down only when she saw headlights pierce the white maelstrom whirling all around her. Although neither vehicle could have been traveling very fast, the lights clarified with astonishing speed and were past her before she had time to react. The visibility was so poor that she hadn't seen the other car until there had been a meager few yards between them. Now, suddenly caught in the whirling curtain of its wake, a whiteout made it impossible to see an inch past her windshield for an awful span of year-like seconds.

Ruth instinctively wrenched the wheel to the right; only to swing it around to the left again as the over-compensation took her out of the ruts. When the whiteout cleared, it was to find the nose of the car had been whipped around until it was pointing toward the ditch. The headlights yawed drunkenly for what seemed like an eternity before her tires found purchase and brought her back onto the pavement.

She was so shaken that, in spite of the car's heater having scarcely begun to work, beads of perspiration had blossomed on her brow. This was crazy! It was insane to try to go any further.

But then, piercing through her fear, she imagined Bill talking to friends about his 'crazy-driving wife' in that half-boastful way he had. "The girl's got guts," he would always end with an admiring shake of his head – a gesture that said that having guts was something he valued.

Barely conscious of doing so, her foot pressed even harder on the gas.

Now, through the dubious glow of the headlights, the road began a plunging descent. On a clear day, she knew that it led down to a bridge spanning the Souris River, but tonight, unable to see the bottom, it was hard to believe that the real world existed beyond all this madness. On the other hand, it was uncomfortably easy to believe that the sinking pavement was taking her to some other...*darker* place not of this world that held some entity, even darker still, waiting in ambush.

She braced herself, hands clenching the wheel, every instinct but one screaming for her to slow down.

Then suddenly, just as it was registering that touching the breaks would almost certainly put the car into a spin, out of the raging storm, like the eyes of a ravenous monster, twin shafts of light, set high and wide apart, announced an approaching semi, bare seconds away. The absence of any illumination, whatsoever, on either side of those angry beams promised a whiteout as massive as it was lethal.

Ruth felt a stab of pure terror.

Paralyzed by this nightmare, convinced that it was coming to claim her, a single thought flashed through her mind, so deceptively uncomplicated that it might well be mistaken for calm.

“So this is Death.”

At the same time *Demo #1*'s front tire caught the frozen edge of a rut. Then, in the heartbeat before the shroud descended, she had a vision of her husband's face, and screamed his name.

* * *

Weary but happy, soldiers in desert camouflage made their way through the airport corridors, following the helpful directions of strategically placed military policemen along the way.

Weary and happy as the rest of them, Bill heard the cheering at the bottom of the escalator, and knew that the folks at home had made it in to greet them. His view was blocked by the back of ‘Pudgy’ Grealer's head, but he started to crane his neck around anyway. Ruthie was one of those people down there cheering, and oh Lord – oh, good God almighty – he needed to see her again! It was all he could do to keep himself from grabbing Grealer by the shoulders and tossing him to the side. His wife was achingly near now, he could *feel* her, and anyone standing in the way was flat out taking their chances.

The descending escalator gradually brought the crowd into view. There was a sea of happy, cheering faces with here and there a ‘Welcome Home!’ placard held aloft among a forest of waving arms.

Pudgy waved and shouted to someone in the throng. Instinctively, but to no one in particular, he found himself doing the same.

Home!

After all the fear, after all the longing, after all the dust, the dirt, and the death, here he was, safe and sound at last! Here he was, home-sweet-home!

Well no, he corrected, that wasn't *quite* right. He wasn't there just yet, not until he was holding Ruth again.

All the while he continued to scan the crowd, looking for that beautiful, familiar face.

And then he heard her.

“Bill!”

He wrenched his head around so hard that he strained a muscle in his neck, and would wonder about that later on.

Then he saw her, and he would wonder about that, too. She was laughing and running toward him, arms spread wide. Then, even while he was reaching out to embrace her, she pulled up short, grinning impishly, and flashed open the lapels of her coat, revealing a glimpse of negligee that covered a scandalous minimum of that wonderful body he'd been dreaming about for so long.

Caught in the surprise, he threw back his head and laughed harder than he had in months. That was Ruthie all over! You just never knew what she was going to come up with! Man, did he love that woman, or what! And in that moment, he felt a surge of desire that was like water bursting from a dam.

But after he refocused, both laughter and desire abruptly faded...because she had vanished.

He stopped in mid-stride, his arms still unconsciously spread. Bill blinked and shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He rubbed his eyes, and stared again, but the spot where he would later swear he saw his wife was now filled by a captain of the artillery embracing his own family.

He whirled around in a perplexed three-sixty, so completely bewildered that, at first, he wasn't aware of the chill running up his spine.

Not far away, he noticed his company CO, talking to one of the base's padres. Their serious faces stood out in that tidal wave of jubilation like blood on snow.

Now he felt the chill. It crept up the nape of his neck, contracting his scalp; pulling the skin taut against his skull.

Even as he stared, both men began to scan the crowd, searching for one particular face.

Seconds later, they found him.

The End

CW Lovatt

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