

Open Roads

By Larry Johnson

The first couple of days in Jerry's trailer had been better than Roger would have thought. He always envied Jerry his slob life style, his happy-go-lucky ways, the beer cans and pizza cartons strewn around his tin can of a house, the trash being more than just garbage: Jerry's place reeked of freedom!

Punctuating the trash in the tiny living room could be seen, in random abandon, Jerry's fly rods, two shotguns, a .22, two skis and one pole, a telescope, and several damaged tennis rackets. All along the narrow hallway and inside the cubbyhole bathroom were plastered nude photos from old girlie magazines, tacked or Scotch-taped onto the walls, so quaintly out of date and politically incorrect now, reminiscent of black- and-white movies of World War II swabbies' lockers.

It wasn't just that Roger picked Jerry's "mobile home" for its happy, sloppy comfort, the only refuge he could think of for his suddenly strange new life. Yes, it's true, the first image that popped into Roger's brain as Vicki threw him out the door was his buddy's Airstream. The place conjured up memories of an older safe place, Jerry's tree house, now reincarnated in this mobile home that had gone only the distance from the sales lot to rest atop assorted blocks of cement Jerry stole from a construction site.

In the tree house not that many years ago, Jerry and Roger spent endless hours playing Monopoly or talking about girls as if they knew a thing or two, or re-enacting their favorite episodes in Saturday matinee movies they had just seen. A haven where they practiced grown-up gestures by smoking the Viceroys Roger sneaked out of his mother's purse, all the while hiding from each other the nausea they felt.

No, it wasn't that Jerry's place was just safe. He knew Jerry would ask no questions. Jerry made no judgments about anything. That, more than

anything, guaranteed Roger that Jerry would be a friend for life.

Roger knew that if he ever walked out on Victoria she'd never let him back into the house. She'd told him so in no uncertain terms when their fights got right up to the brink. She'd bar him from their house, or rather, her mother's house, forever.

She was a New Englander. New Englanders never kid about these things.

The house, her mother's house, was a rattling, wheezing monster of a house, with once-quaint white clapboards sticking out like buck teeth now needing paint, many of them askew here and there from fierce New England winds and storms. A house as old, frumpy and stale-smelling as Vicki's mother was in her last years.

There was a time, in the first years of Vicki and Roger's marriage, when they didn't have enough money for a pot to pee in, when Vicki's mama lorded it over Vicki and

Roger, the mama having the run of the whole house, all three massive stories of it, leaving her daughter and son-in-law to live down in the dank and cold basement.

I can tell you the mama was glad to have them there, she was afraid of the dark and on any day having a heart attack with nobody there to dial 911. But she liked her power, too, to lord it over them. I think it is just in the way of old people, to be afraid and yet, somehow, mean, too.

It is hard to be old.

In the basement, with just little cellar windows overhead, where the furnace burped at night and you could hear the dripping of ancient water pipes, Vicki and Roger had to stand on tippy-toe to see the weather outside, to know if the sun was up or not. Until Vicki's mama, Emma -- that was her name -- found her permanent home in the Ellingson Memorial Cemetery, five miles away down crooked Yankee roads lined with stone fences. That place where Emma went every Sunday to make

sure her burial plot, the one she had all paid up for by 1978, hadn't been desecrated, as it sometimes was, by beer cans or spent condoms left thoughtlessly behind by teenagers in heat.

Roger came to Jerry's safe hovel because, as I say, Roger knew Jerry wouldn't act shocked, wouldn't ask a whole lot of questions. Questions everyone else brainlessly asked: How such a "perfect couple" could decide to split the sheets.

It took Roger a while to figure out that his friends, usually couples, weren't that much concerned about his fate as they were about their own. If *his* marriage, so solid looking, could fail, what did that say about *their* marriages? When talking to them, Roger saw them go into themselves, leaving him sitting there.

One of Roger's friends stayed away from work for a whole week while he went into a depression. Three months later he was divorced from his wife.

With a couple of hastily packed bags, Roger knocked on the tinny door to Jerry's trailer. Jerry took one look and said, "You want the sofa?", pointing to an ancient lumpy couch with a wool blanket draped loosely over it to cover up a number of holes and stains accumulated over time. The blanket itself was full of red dog hairs from Shep, an arthritic Irish setter that died on Jerry some six or seven years ago.

Instead of Shep, the sofa was now laden with golf clubs, rumpled clothes, two huge ash trays full of stale Marlboro butts, and a pile of old newspapers. Magnanimously, Jerry swept the piles onto the floor with his huge hands, more interested in economy of movement than the aesthetics of having all that crap on the floor.

"Or do you want my bed?", Jerry wanted to know. Roger didn't want to imagine what the bed was like, the dog-haired sofa looked fine. In fact, the sofa was a perfect mirror

to his soul: he was a mean old dog kicked out into the world, a worthless old bloodhound. For the first time since

his crack-up with Vicki only a few hours ago, Roger felt a twinge of happiness.

"Sofa looks fine to me," Roger said, and that was all there was to it. Jerry opened two bottles of warm beer, gave Roger one, then disappeared into the back of the trailer to resume watching TV.

Roger had driven up to Jerry's place in the 1986 Chrysler, the one he'd bought Vicki as a 10th anniversary present in a happier time. In the trunk were his clothes and his portable computer. Stuffed into the back of the trunk was one tennis shoe, he hadn't the patience to look for and find the other one.

Before leaving home at dawn (he and Vicki had been bickering all night before she finally had had enough), Roger, before he went out the door, passed up tearful offers from Vicki to split up photos from the family album, take his share of the furniture, dishes, silverware, whatever. He wasn't sure that then was the right time to do it, and, anyway, he wanted to show he had his dignity. He didn't need any stuff. That's how badly he wanted to get the hell out of there, away from Vicki, who had the moral high ground anyway, given his adulteries, and away from Emma's ghost, the past, the failed marriage. Away from all of it.

Driving out of Emma's ancient gravel driveway, the familiar crunch- crunch sound of it, in a way, to himself Roger felt, how do the kids say it, "cool." He was caveman again, a minimized, lean and mean guerrilla fighter, mobile and ready to move in any direction, a commando with the bare minimum. Just clothes and computer. Fuck the rest. Well, OK, he stashed in the back seat his stereo, and the Willie Nelson and Mozart CD's, and the baseball that Ted Williams had once autographed for his father, the best birthday present he got on his 10th birthday. Oh, yeah, and there was a box full of old, crumpled-up tax records and receipts, and, I forgot this: his briefcase, inside of which was a framed picture of his parents, taken at some lake like all the other lakes in Minnesota in 1944, he never knew which lake or if that even mattered, Roger didn't know what they were doing there or why, but it was the only picture he

had of them smiling. It was taken with an old Kodak with baffles and shutters and a viewfinder you really had to squint into, two years before he was born, and many years before his mom and pop shriveled up, went silent and died.

But seven days at Jerry's was all Roger could take. He felt the itch to go off and heal on his own, like a wounded animal in the forest, an image that crawled into his head. Waking up one morning on Jerry's sofa, Roger wondered if wounded animals go off somewhere because they're embarrassed, wondered if animals other than humans could be embarrassed. He wanted to talk to Jerry about that, but before he could Jerry handed him the sports page from the newspaper, gave Roger some toast, farted, and went off to work.

When Jerry was at work Roger had the whole trailer to himself, and he could cry, really cry hard and out loud, and that surprised him, because when he was a kid, he remembered crying differently, a kind of cry to get mom or dad out there to make it better. This was a real wail. It made him feel good.

The tears flowed sometimes in torrents, and he was glad that he didn't embarrass himself to himself. He told himself he was a better man for this, a 90's kind of guy. He would have felt uncomfortable to do this in front of Jerry, who probably would have understood, but Roger wouldn't have liked the superior feeling Jerry's watching might have produced in Jerry.

In Roger's mind, Jerry was the mythic bachelor. He had a life that took a wide swing around women when Jerry had no need for them, then he'd prey on them like an eagle, just for a night or two, and then that was it. Roger wondered how Jerry could do that. Roger was not capable of that. Roger was all for commitment.

But as Roger hung around in the trailer, venturing into Jerry's bedroom to watch game shows on daytime TV, Roger figured, judging by the general appearance of Jerry's Airstream, that Jerry's days as woman

killer were either in the past or never happened the way Roger thought they did.

Anyway, what I want to tell you now is this: Jerry made Roger feel better about himself just by making Roger feel that no matter how bad things were for Roger, Jerry had it worse. Jerry was a slob and a loser, and this made Roger feel good, better by far than if Roger had checked into some anonymous motel.

A week after washing up at Jerry's doorstep, Roger left eight twenty-dollar bills on Jerry's formica dining table and a note with scribbled thanks, and Roger got back in the 1986 Chrysler. At first he flooded it, then he got the thing going and headed down the driveway and back into town, Pottsville, navigating in the direction of the freeway.

I can tell you that Roger was feeling pretty good now, and if you asked him, he would have told you the same thing, and he would have been telling you the truth. He was still too new to his new freedom to miss female company. Feeling lonely and in need of a woman would come a whole lot later, and to tell you the honest truth, I don't know, later on, how well he did on that score.

But that's not where we're at right now. Picture this: Roger at the wheel of his white convertible Chrysler, feeling the open spring air of a New England May day, thinking about all the wild possibilities, the unknowns, facing him. Roger is a positive thinker, for the most part. He was thrilled, not knowing or caring where in God's earth he was going to go, all he had as certainties were the knowledge of a full tank of gas and a MasterCard card that still had \$1,980.17 of credit left on it, so long as he made the monthly payments. That could get him to any destination he wanted to think about: Atlanta, San Francisco, El Paso, New Orleans, maybe Phoenix. Someplace warm, with

no Atlantic winds, no Yankee accents, and the promise of being known to absolutely nobody.

Freedom. Roger thought about it. He thought about how quickly most men, wanting freedom, talking about it all the time, shrink in fear from it

the moment they have it fully in their grasp. He felt heightened sensations coursing through him of fear and exhilaration: he loved that, knew what it was. He loved knowing he was alive again, free from anybody trying to hold him down, "understand" him, change him.

In the middle of rural Connecticut, he drove straight through a stop sign and gave out a hyena laugh. He gave the finger to the highway in front of him, he gave the finger to the hills and trees all around, and to Jerry's diminishing Airstream in his rear-view mirror. Not in anger. In joy.

And that old sensation arrived: the nagging wonder if he just might be, after all, crazier than a hoot owl. "Yaaa-hoooo!", he howled, and floored it onto Connecticut Route 12, laying down some rubber in the process. "Let the games begin!", he hollered.

The sun was setting, and the orange orb of the sun glinted off the front window of good old Pappy's grocery store. For years Roger bought from Pappy white bread, instant coffee, an occasional lottery ticket, and the Sunday paper every weekend. Old Pappy sold his wares at prices much higher than at the Harbor Market down in the mall just a few miles away, but Roger gave Pappy his custom anyway, just because he liked to shoot the shit with Pappy, and smell the old wood in the funky little store, and see the sticks and blobs of candy in big old candy jars, just like in the pictures of his family's ancient photo albums that he once looked through as a kid before somebody lost them all.

"Bye, Pappy, 'bye Plattesville...bye, bye, Blackbird, good-bye," Roger roared. "Gentlemen, start your engines...Let the games begin!...Whiskey for my men, and fresh horses!" Roger was on a roll. And, before you knew it, Pappy's little spot on the corner of Pierce and Vine was now a little dot in Roger's rearview mirror.

Having come to the freeway entrance that promised it would take Roger westward, but as if on its own volition, Roger's Chrysler took a left rather than the right to the wide Portal to America. As if the car had been bewitched to travel in the direction of Emma's haunted house, as if she

had forced the left turn from up on her paid-up plot in Ellingson Memorial Cemetery, forcing Roger to face, for the last time, the place where his now defunct marriage had held domicile. To make one last homage.

Roger didn't resist. He let the car steer him left, but not without wondering a tad why, for he had no real desire to do so.

And then he remembered: the rug.

The rug was an heirloom of Vicki's, handed down by Emma and Henry, and to them before that by Jacob and Emily Crasweller, and before that to them by Hanna Portsworth and whatever the name of her husband was, there was never general agreement whether it was Potter or Stewart, nobody cared enough to remember hard enough, or look it up. And believe me, you could have looked it up, you still can, people around Pottsville have all kinds of records and DAR genealogy buffs. But that's besides the point, because neither Emma nor Roger nor Vicki bothered to, and it's nothing I feel like doing.

The sun by now was hidden behind a bank of black storm clouds that had formed up over to the east, over the Atlantic, then had blown overhead only to make its way back from the west, so that, in good Yankee style, even a breathtaking brilliant sunset was foreclosed, as if that would have been in bad taste. Roger drove down the dark winding roads to his ex-house, more by memory than sight.

Roger smelled the wind, the musk and rot of the sea and the salt of it, he loved the smell of the ocean wind, the fact that you couldn't even tell the wind was there, which was always there and everywhere, unless you felt it. It sneaked up on you, but only when it felt like it.

The smell of the wind foretold of a big spring rain soon to come any minute now, the kind with great big raindrops that splashed like bursted rat bellies on your windshield. At any other time, Roger would have pulled over and stopped driving, just to watch that. But he wanted to get

on, pulled by some siren call to go back to his ex-house, just one more time, look around. He figured Emma was in on this, but it didn't bother him a bit, so giddy was he on his freedom ride.

But then the thing came back into his head: the rug, that rug. Maybe get the rug, if Vicki didn't want it. Go there and see. Take it, if nobody's there, if nobody's taken it already.

God knows, they both had made enough jokes about it, this frayed, decayed thing, yellowed over here by too much sunlight over the years, like a museum-piece daguerreotype. Packed down real good over there like two truncated railroad tracks, two ribbons of wear from an even more ancient heavy rocking chair that held suckling babies and dying aunts and overweight uncles, this immovable rocking chair stubbornly kept in the same place, never moving, like Jerry's Airstream on its cement blocks, over decades.

Back to Roger in the car, driving it and letting it drive, free man and slave to the moment.

Roger, pulling the Chrysler over the crunch-crunch of the gravel driveway to his ex-house, Emma's house, before now that familiar crunch-crunch the always welcome comforting sound of coming home.

Turning off the ignition, there came to Roger a renewed clarity of the moment: the rug.

If Vicki hadn't already taken it. And why he would want that damned smelly old ground-up, sun-stained thing, he couldn't say, it wasn't, after all, *his* heritage, his family's goddamned *heirloom*, it was junk that would go into Vicki's new life with whatshisname and his kid. The cute kid, what was he, three, four years old? The kid could frolic on it, stare, as he, Roger, had, into the patterns of geraniums and roses and gargoyle-looking plants of weird shapes and leaves, all coaxing you to stare at it all for hours, losing yourself in those images, this jungle of shapes and possibilities. It was that memory, those reveries of getting lost in the

carpet when Emma went on and on with the same old stories about how awful the Depression was, and how her Henry was unaccounted for on some obscure Pacific island somewhere, where, as far as she was concerned, he was probably still alive, having been hit over the head by some falling piece of Jap plane and all confused and forgetful about where he was and who he was, Emma telling the same damn old story the same old way, over and over again, and Roger lost in the swirls of the rug, listening and not listening.

Roger liked to buy into Emma's story about Henry, but in his own perverse way, about how, in Roger's version, Henry got lost in the floral jungle of the heirloom, as Emma rocked in the railroad track grooves of the rocking chair and the house got dark, because Emma wouldn't turn on a light until it got really dark outside and you could hardly see a thing in the house. She had money, but she sure was cheap. I'll tell you, that house, it could look like that one in the Alfred Hitchcock movie, with that warped guy who carved up the woman in the shower, that was how creepy it could look.

Roger liked the story of Henry getting smacked on the head by the tail of a wounded Jap Zero, but Roger's version, which he kept inside his head and never told anybody, was also this: Henry regained consciousness and remembered who he was, but instead of fessing up to that he starts jabbering like a monkey insane, to get himself out of the combat zone and away, forever, from the bitch Emma. Yes! Roger could see Henry, roaming around the jungle of that yellowed, stale rug, roaming in there lost but not really lost, and Roger (and his imagined Henry with him), all the while Emma went on and on, would just sit and smile.

As I was saying, Roger switched off the ignition to the Chrysler, and the epiphany hit him: He had a chance at the rug. If it was still there. Take it. Take it to his next place, wherever that was, and stare at it to his heart's content, with nobody yacking nearby to distract him, Roger free now. He could get lost in there and dream, have his new dreams run around in there.

Roger walks up the gravel driveway, the crunch crunch slowing him down a little, and he sees a light on in a back room he knows is the kitchen. He tries the door but it is locked.

Vicki and Roger, and Emma before them, and as far as he knew the Craswellers before Emma and Henry, had never seen any sense in locking the door. No need to. No serious crimes had ever been committed in Pottsville (unless you count that one time, somewhere in the 50's or 60's, when that Cuban maid of the Ramsfords was killed under mysterious circumstances, but nobody paid that one much account. Nobody ever bothered to claim the body).

Roger knocks on the door, then turns and is heading back to the Chrysler when suddenly Vicki appears at the door.

"Hi, Rog'. You want to come in?" She seemed to mean it. The anger of a week ago was gone. It was as if nothing had happened, as if the world hadn't opened and swallowed them up.

"How come the door's locked?", he wanted to know, and he really did want to know.

"It's the realtors," Vicki said, as she opened the door wider to invite him in. "They keep it locked," she said. "I forgot when I came in that the lock is set to lock. I didn't even know it could do that, till I saw you try to get in and you couldn't."

For lack of anything better to say, Roger said this: "Huh. Imagine that. I don't think I ever had a key."

I think people forget just how much conversation is full of filler, just to say something for the sake of saying something so as not to look dead or stupid. This was what was going on with Vicki and Roger now, and so I leave all that filler out of this.

Roger came inside, careful not to brush against Vicki in passing by her, a kind of unspoken respect for her status, his status, whatever you call people who want to be civil in the middle of a crack-up.

He turned his face away from the woman who was still his wife, not wanting to look her in the eye. He hated people who wouldn't look him in the eye, it was looking people in the eye that made him such a good salesman, people trusted him for that. And now he couldn't look the woman in the eye, the woman he had had just about every intimacy with you could imagine.

"Sorry to bother, you, Vick', I just wanted to take one more look around, see if I forgot anything."

Behind him, if you looked back towards where he was standing and through the large living-room windows, the threatening black storm clouds had advanced their march, and the roll of thunder could be heard not far off. Not so many days ago, Roger would

have jumped out of the heavy rocker, the ancient one that made the grooves in the carpet, and he'd run to the porch and watch the storms coming in off the sea. Roger, he loved the thunder and lightning, the crazy chaos.

But this wasn't one of those nights, suddenly he just wanted to get out of there, hit the road, forget this place.

But the rug called him. He wanted to see if anything was going to happen to that rug. The Chrysler was a convertible, and even if it was still too cold to put the top down, he could put the top down, roll that rug up, twist it over so it could fit sideways, that rotten supple thing, tape it together, and stash it in the back seat, then figure out later what to do with it after he got the hell out of there.

"Well, come on in, take a look around," Vicki said, "Take anything you want." But to Roger the tone of her voice said this: Come and bury your dead, I've buried mine. Like the gallantry of the Civil War, when both sides would stop shooting at each other and, under white flags, they'd

intermingle and pass by each other, maybe even say hello when they did that, clearing the battlefield of the horrors of the day's massacre, hauling out their dead. That was the image that played around in Roger's head.

"No, no, I'll be going, just a nervous thing, I guess, making sure I got all my stuff," Roger said, still looking around at everything except Vicki's face. Looking at boxes everywhere, seeing everything was packed and stacked, nice and neat, Vicki's style. Roger now, knowing there wouldn't be any loose ends anywhere for a diversion, saying something just to say something, not so sure anymore about the rug: "I'll be going now."

"Oh, for Chrissakes, Roger, come on in, we can have a cup of tea, anyway, before you go out in that weather. It could be a real howler. You can stay the night if you want, crash on the floor if you want to."

And with that, Vicki gestured Roger to move into the wider living room, where there was nothing to be seen but a large number of neatly stacked boxes with the logo and name of "Mayflower" emblazoned upon them. And the old rug underneath. Obscured now, a tarmac for the boxes to take off from. A launching pad with truncated railroad tracks.

"I'll come in," Roger demurred, "but just for a sec. And that tea, that sounds pretty good, actually." Roger stepped past Vicki, again gingerly aware of the space to be kept between them, on into the vastness of the cold living room and its high ceiling, dimmed this time not by Emma's parsimony, but by the single dull light coming from the kitchen farther back.

Vicki, Roger figured, was here for her own unspoken reasons, she'd obviously done whatever it was she had planned to do before he arrived, there were no signs of any recent activity, nothing lying around looking unfinished.

He almost asked her, in fact, what she was doing here, but held himself in check. He didn't want her to know his reason, so he figured it was

only fair he shouldn't know hers.

"Pull up a box," Vicki said with a forced smile, and disappeared into the kitchen.

With an uncontrolled sigh that he hoped Vicki hadn't heard back there in the kitchen, Roger realized that this might be the last conversation they'd have together for some time, maybe the last one ever, for all he knew. And as far as I know, maybe it was.

She returned with two steaming cups of tea.

"So, where you off to, Roger? How have you been?"

Roger finally forced himself to look straight at Vicki to see if there were any signs of mockery or perfunctory politeness to her questions. What he saw were eyes with real questions in them.

"*Can't rightly say, M'am,*" Roger returned, with his best attempt at Clint Eastwood. "*Reckon I'll roam these parts for a while, see if I can grub- stake myself somethin', settle down.*"

Vicki, always a good sport, Roger thought, laughed. It was a phony laugh, sure enough, but Roger welcomed it.

Roger put down his cup and stood up from the box he was sitting on. There had been enough talk. "You going to take the rug?" Get right to it.

"You know, Roger, like I said, take anything you want. You want it, you take it."

"But it's been in your family all these years, you know, an *heirloom*." As soon as he said that, Roger regretted what must have surely sounded to Vicki like sarcasm.

But quickly, as if reading his regret and immediately wanting to allay it, Vicki retorted: "No, really, Rog', you want it, you take it. See, we...," and she caught herself.

At her "we" both Roger and Vicki suddenly felt the presence of something else there, the thing that took the place of Emma's ghost: Hamilton. Good ol' "Ham," the oh-so-friendly neighbor who "consoled" Vicki after Roger admitted to her his affair to his secretary, a married woman herself who retreated back into her unhappy marriage rather than fan the fires of Pottsville's gossip-mongers, but doing so only after it was too late for Roger. Roger, who confessed his infidelity to Vicki and thereby sank *their* marriage forever. Ah, yes. But then, I happen to agree with those friends of Roger's

who think he confessed his infidelity in order to *ensure* his marriage's failure, not save it. But I could be wrong.

"Ah, yes, we...", Roger no longer caring if sarcasm came out of the bass section of his voice to overwhelm the melody: "We is starting without any old tatters from the past, are we?" He took a sip of tea, just to do something.

"Oh, go fuck yourself, Roger." Their eyes locked now.

In a perverse way, though, Roger admired her pluck to tell him to go fuck himself. Maybe it was her way of telling him she was getting her own kind of liberation out of this deal. In all their 14 years of marriage she hadn't once dropped into the world of four letters, except for that one time she slammed the car door on her finger and said "Shit, shit, shit!"

In their love-making, Roger could never bring himself to say it, but he would have liked that, her saying fuck while they were fucking, somewhere in there while it was still going on, making their strange wonderful noises and faces. But there was no point in bringing that up now.

"Sorry, Vick'. Sorry. I shouldn't be here, I'm sorry. Go live your life, good luck to you. I'll go live mine." Putting the teacup down, the tea

half-finished, Roger clanked the cup loudly against the saucer. As if to atone, he lifted the cup up gently again, and gently put it down again.

"Oh, come on, Roger, I'm sorry, too. This isn't that easy, is it? I mean, we never really *talked* about any of this, maybe we should. About what happened, I mean." She picked up his cup, but held it as if hostage, not willing to take it back into the kitchen. Unsure what to do with it.

"Please, Victoria, the one thing I have to give you credit for is that we *didn't* have to talk about all of this, that we could just take the consequences and go with that."

He meant it. Born in the Midwest, Roger had taken on, in the past 14 years, some of the flinty protective covering of the dour and stoic Yankees who haunted all the Pottsville houses.

He sat back down on the Mayflower box he had been sitting on before, unaware of why he was doing it.

Vicki turned her back on him, sat his cup on another Mayflower box facing her at the level of her eyes. To the wall she uttered: "Do you suppose that if we had had kids, that that would have made any difference? Because I want to tell you..." she paused then. And then she said: "It wouldn't have made any difference. None at all."

As if the Mayflower box he was sitting on suddenly erupted, Roger sprung up. *Shit, I don't want to have this conversation* coursed through his mind. He moved towards the

door. "What even makes you think that I thought that," he said, not wanting to have asked, not wanting her answer.

"Because you never wanted to talk about it when I did," and with this Vicki turned to face him. "Because I think you felt, somehow, ashamed or impotent, even though you know the reason is me, or at least us, something wrong with our combined chemistries. God, we saw all the quacks. Who knows, who cares. But you'd always avoid the subject, talk

about something else, get pissed off, you know? You know?"
She asked him that, but I can tell you that she was the one who really

wanted to know.

"Well, you're right, that's not it," and Roger was feeling some kind of heat rise to his face, and goddammit, he could feel his eyes water now, and he wanted nothing more now than to run back to Jerry's dump, talk about fly rods and shotguns and how they used to cruise in his '59 Buick for poontang at the burger drive-in places, and...well, anything else but this.

"I have to go now."
He was now at the door, fumbling with it, since the door again was

locked, holding him in as before it held him out. "I have to go."
"Well, what about the rug? You want it?" "Unh-unh. Nope. You take it."

"But I don't want it," her green eyes now taking in his, and damn it if he wasn't sure that some wetness had crawled out of his eyelids and started to move down his cheek. Shit, shit, shit. It felt warm, and if he tasted it, he knew it would taste salty.

"No, no, really...", and he could hear his voice crack. Angry, he wrestled with the doorknob.

And, fumbling, he finally got himself free, out of there.

In no time at all, the Chrysler spit out torrents of gravel as Roger hit the accelerator hard.

Above, the black clouds unloaded themselves. Heavy glops of spring rain pasted the windows on the Chrysler and Emma's windows as well, some of which the realtors, in their carelessness, had left wide open. Yellow curtains flapped into the interior, making clapping sounds like seal's flippers, and the elms and the oaks dotting the lawn outside yawned to the wind and the rain in unison.

At the same time, a lawn chair lifted into the air to hit a potted plant, knocking it over. Some of the loose old cream-white clapboards, stale- looking as seagull guano, were hurled to the ground.

In the dully-lit kitchen, beneath the cracks of the overhead thunder and lightning, Vicki resumed what she had been doing before Roger had unexpectedly pulled up in the gravel driveway.

She picked up the phone.

"Hello, Mr. McCutcheon? This is Vicki Farmer. Yes...What? Yes, I got rid of most of the stuff at the garage sale, you wouldn't believe the crowd that came, buying all that junk. Can you believe it, I got \$45 for that old record player?...But the rug, couldn't give it away...Sure, everybody says it's a hand-made Persian, but tell me this, you want it?...That's what I thought...OK. So if you'll come by tomorrow, I'll give you the \$10 for the dump fee."

"Bye."

With that, Vicki collected the teacup Roger had been drinking from, took it to the kitchen sink, poured out what was left in there, ran some hot water over it, and wiped it dry. Then she carefully put it in the last of the open Mayflower boxes, where, nicely wrapped and safe, there were neat rows of cups just like it.

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