

Marjorie Bumpkiss had forgotten to buy butter. Butter for the potatoes. Butter for the corn. Butter for the biscuits. Butter for the pie crusts. Butter, butter, butter, she scolded. The most important thing for tonight. You walked right past it, you stupid bitch. The two-for-one sale on Kraft shredded cheese distracted her, as she ransacked the display for cheddar. All she came up with was the Tex-Mex mix with jalapeno, which gave Grant the ring of fire. And then off she went to the eggs and orange juice. Dumb bitch. Stupid, dumb bitch.

Her tiny red hatchback sliced the corner of a sharp right, sending dry leaves diving for cover, then jerked left at the fork. The morning sun stung her eyes through her cat-eyed Ray Bans. She lifted a finger and swung the sun visor down with her manicured nail. I'll take Argyle to Haverhill, then go up the back way along Stock, she thought. No left turns, only one light. I'll be back at the store in less than ten minutes, and I'll just make a joke to the cashier about why I'm back so soon. Hungry again! No, wait. Not a cute one. It's always something! That would be better. She thought about Rosanne Rosannadana. Poor Gilda. I need to make a doctor's appointment.

The car rose up Haverhill and Marjorie saw a giant tree lying across the road, surrounded by police cars and maintenance vehicles. The men stood to the side drinking coffee, while two fat, bearded city workers in hardhats and protective glasses maneuvered some straps around its branches and yelled above the whirl of their truck. Shit, she thought. Of course. Goddamn shit. Of all bloody days. What, do I have a black cloud above me?

A young policeman walked over to her car as she approached. Marjorie quickly glanced into the visor's mirror. Hair bobbed and smoothed, red lips drawn, sleeveless blouse matching her green sunglasses. She saw a 52-year-old bottle blonde who needed a tan and a facial. "Great," she muttered. He'll probably call me ma'am.

"Good morning, ma'am," Constable Jefferies said on cue. "As you can see we're dealin' with this," thrusting a thumb over his shoulder. "Old thang. Just keeled over. You'll have to detour, we'll be awhile. Where you headed?"

Marjorie panicked. Don't tell him the grocery store. Bags that didn't fit in the trunk were on the backseat, and he'll see them and think I'm lying. "The hardware store on Steans," she spat out. The hardware store, which was about three kilometres the other

way from the grocery store. Marjorie, you fucking idiot, she thought. The pet store next to Food Mart! The pet store!

“Ah, well you can go back down Haverhill and make the first two lefts. That’ll take you to Gateway Drive. Go left there and straight along to Steans,” Jefferies said with a smile.

“Great, thank you!” Marjorie smiled back. She pulled a three point turn and watched him shrink in her rear view.

As she rounded the first left, she slowed the car, plotting her path. I don’t want to take Gateway, the traffic is awful and I’ll get back to the store during the morning rush. If I go a bit further, isn’t there a bridge there? At the end of Van Hopper? I think that’s it. Or was it Bugle? Maybe it’s Bugle. I’ll remember it when I see it. As she crept along the road she noticed the trees blocked the sun out. Trimmed boulevard hedges got thicker and more unkempt as the houses got smaller and further apart. There was a wall of cedar bush with a small archway. That must be it, she thought. She turned in, cedar branches scratching at the sides of her Fiesta. The road was dirt, but wide enough for her car. It stretched along a wide field surrounded by trees, a giant willow at the end. This must be it, she thought, although she didn’t speed up. She strained to see the end, obscured by a low-hanging branch on the willow. The creek was definitely there, she could see the gap where it dropped down. Was that the bridge? It must be. No road would lead to a dead end like that.

The car inched along, stopping as the branch grazed her front bumper. She couldn’t see around it. She looked out the driver’s window at the shiny mud leftover from Monday’s rainstorm. Her sigh turned into a growl at her strappy sandals. Black goddamn cloud, she thought. She squinted and made out a post through the soft willow leaves as they blew in the breeze. That’s it! That’s the bridge! She hit the gas and lurched forward like in a car wash, the willow leaves caressing the hood and windshield.

The first drop was the height difference of the bridge, she thought. Suddenly the branch jumped in the wind. A loud, sorrowful groan from the underside of her car filled in for her silent scream as the hatchback tilted forward, its rear wheels lifting three feet off the ground.

The post was a signpost, warning of the drop down to the creek. Marjorie's car balanced on the edge, staring down the drop of dirt, mud, rocks and gravel. The drop went twenty feet down, with the rocks protruding like neglected teeth. Marjorie's hands fought numbness as her left braced the wheel and her right threw it into reverse. The wheels spun.

This isn't happening, this isn't happening, Marjorie kept thinking. She looked down at her purse under the dash, where it had tumbled from the passenger's seat. She went to reach for it, but as the seatbelt pulled her back into the chair, she felt the car threaten to nosedive. My phone, she thought. How do I get my phone? She slowly took the seatbelt off and kept it in hand as it retracted. Sweat began seeping out behind her neck and knees as her heart thumped hard and steady.

Suddenly, the cabbage escaped from its bag and hit the backseat floor with a thud. Marjorie jumped and yelped, and the car tilted forward slightly, then came back to rest. Her hands started to grasp at anything, the wheel, the stick, her skirt. She took off her sunglasses and tossed them out the open window. Through the windshield, she saw the steady, quick stream of the brown water. Dried leaves from the willow and surrounding trees cascaded in with each gust of wind, dropping down, down, down...

Her hand shot out for the door handle. When the door swings forward, she thought, it will take the whole thing down with it. Maybe I can just open it a bit. But then I'll struggle to get out and that'll set it off. She realized how trapped she really was. Panic took hold. She started and stopped about five sentences and let her hands dance over her, then clutched the neckline of her blouse. Oh my god, she thought. I'm going to die in here. I'm not going to make it out. I'm going to die.

"Help!" she screamed. "Help me somebody! Help me! I'm going to die!" Her voice came out like a thousand small bells ringing at once, loud but high, and piercing. She waited, panting. Nobody called back. Nobody came. She screamed again. Nothing.

I can't stay here, she thought. You always hesitate. You always hesitate and that's when the worst thing happens. She realized the voice in her head was a man. Grant, come for me now, she thought. Come and save me. But it wasn't him. It was from that summer when she was 17, in Highland Park. A handicapped girl ran out in front of the car. Marjorie didn't break, she froze. Dad grabbed the wheel and pulled right,

avoiding her. The girl's parents screamed at her. Dad screamed at her, to the side of her face. You always hesitate, Marjie! What's wrong with you? You could've killed her! He was right. Just open the door. Get out. It's fine. You're being a baby. It was in her voice again.

She slowly ran her hand up the door and grabbed the door handle firmly. She took three deep breaths and pulled. The car stayed put. You can do this, she thought. She didn't feel it though. She slowly pushed the door open until there was enough room for her to wiggle out. The car didn't move. Ok, good. Now you're there, she thought. She let go of the door handle. It was past the point of balance. The door swung forward and the car skidded right as it tilted to about forty-five degrees. Another ear-piercing scream escaped Marjorie's mouth. She grabbed the side of the chair and shifter. Her legs were now hanging out of the driver's door, a straight drop down to a large rock below. She kept screaming into the upholstery. The car rested its front bumper against another rock. When she realized it was still, she stopped screaming.

She could see the willow tree through the back window. I have to get to there, she thought. She felt the adrenaline coursing through her body. She tested the grip of her right arm on the chair. It was strong. She let go of the stick with her left, and pushed the trunk button on the keychain. The hatchback popped. She reached up with her left hand and felt for the back of the console. She clawed like an animal at the seam of the backseat with her right hand, hungrily searching for something to grip. The slick leather made it impossible. She panicked and grabbed the mesh pocket behind her chair. Ok Marjorie, pull your legs up. Her foot found the dashboard. She walked it closer to the passenger's side, which was now more right than down. Once it was secure, she pushed off and thrust her left hand forward for something, anything. She got the centre seatbelt. Shopping bags and groceries were strewn along the backseat and floor. There was nowhere secure for her right hand. She reached over and grabbed the bag with the cheese and yogurts, and hurled it out the driver's door. Then the bread and chips, the Chef Boyardee and pie filling, and the celery and carrots. You're unloading too much weight, she thought. I don't care, I don't care, I need to get out of here! She grabbed the fibers of the now-cleared coarse carpet and pulled herself up with both hands. Her right hand dove into the backseat, grabbing a seatbelt lock. The trunk, she thought. How am I

going to get over all the bags in the trunk? Who cares, deal with it when you get there. She pulled herself up a bit further, moving her foot from the dash to the console. Still gripping the centre belt, her right hand let go of the lock and punched the back of the seat instead of gripping the top. The car swayed and groaned. She choked out sounds while her hand grabbed the top of the backseat, followed by her left. You're almost there, Marjorie. You can do this.

She moved her free foot behind the driver's seat, reached up and pushed the trunk lid. The gas lifts opened it like a mouth. Beyond was the willow tree. It's long leaves like fingers, waving delicately at her. Waving goodbye. Goodbye, Marjorie. Fuck you, she thought. She strained her arms and stretched her leg up, getting a foot over the backseat. The wind picked up, gently rocking the car. Go to sleep, she heard the willow tree mock her. Goodnight, Marjorie. She rolled into the trunk on a bed of potatoes, flour, corn and ham. She pressed the soles of her feet into the groceries. The car made a long, echoing groan, like a huge machine powering down. Jump Marjorie, she thought. But she was already in the air.

The car dropped silently, unsheathing her. The car hit the creek with an explosive bang and shatter, reminding her of the distance down. Her hands slid on the mud and clawed for grip. It came up in handfuls, oozing over her fingers and down her arms. Pebbles pecked at her face. An earthworm was crushed between her fingers. Just as she felt herself sliding, she slammed her hands into the earth, nails snapping off, and pressed her face into the mud. Once her grip was secure, she stopped moving. Marjorie hung there and caught her breath. It was all she could do. She felt the mud slide down her hair and neck, cooling her. Time passed unmeasured. It was almost peaceful, the sound of the wind and the trees surrounding her. She thought she heard voices. Two hands gripped her forearms and began pulling her up. She almost fought at first, then heard a man's voice.

"Jesus Christ, she's here! She hung on to the side! Help me pull her up!" When her body was on flat ground again, the blood in her ears eased, and she heard all the voices.

"... in the hydro field just south of the bridge."

"...rope in the truck."

“It’s a fucking mess.”

“...hell were you doing?” She realized the last question was for her. Her lips cracked open to answer. She passed out.

She woke up in the hospital with Grant at her side. He was still in his coveralls with a grease streak on his chin.

“Marjie!” He touched her shoulders. “How’dya feel?” She managed a grunt.

“You in pain? You remember what happened?” The ER curtain pulled aside and a nurse peered in. “I’ll get the doctor.” Soon she was following instructions from a man who looked young enough to be her son.

“Follow the pen. Good. And how many fingers?”

“Two.” Her voice was raspy.

“Good.” He scribbled on his clipboard while a nurse filled a needle.

“Mrs. Bumpkiss, do you remember flashing lights, or perhaps a funny smell before you had your accident?”

“No. I thought it was the bridge.”

“Have you been having any headaches, vision problems, confusion?”

“No. I thought it was the bridge.” The doctor nodded.

“Mrs. Bumpkiss... was this a deliberate act?” Marjorie didn’t understand the question at first. She looked over at Grant. His eyes were big. His lips moved, forming ‘no’.

“No. I thought it was the bridge.” The room seemed to freeze, like they were waiting for more. Finally the doctor continued.

“I’m going to give you this mild tranquilizer to calm your nerves. Your test results came back clear. Looks like this was just a straight up accident. Once you fill out the forms, you and your husband are free to go.” She didn’t feel the needle, but her eyes grew heavy. “You’re a very fortunate woman, Mrs. Bumpkiss.”

When they left Grant sat down beside the bed and watched nurses rush past with carts of beeping machines. Everything was in slow motion, just like in the car. It still didn’t seem real. She remembered dinner. The Wilsons would be coming for seven o’clock. The ham needed forty-five minutes. The thoughts went through her mind, but

her body didn't react. It was just so unreal, so unfamiliar. How did they know the Wilsons? Why did she invite them for dinner? Whatever the reason, it was gone now. She tried to remember the last time she saw them. Everything was a blur. She felt like she could remember the details but not the point.

"Grant?"

"Yeah honey?" Tears welled up in her eyes. She blinked and let them fall.

"I'm not happy."

"Well no shit, Marjie! You almost died and we got a car in the goddamn creek I don't know if the fuckin' insurance is gonna cover--" He trailed off when he saw her tears. His rough hand reached over and wiped her cheek.

"No, Grant. I'm not talking about the car, and today." She began to sob. Grant stretched over the bedrail and stroked her hair.

"Grant," she strained to whisper. "Something's wrong. I need to get some help."