

## The Birthday Car

They drove up highway 299 along Hat Creek at dawn and above the Pit River Canyon as the sun rose. Hannah woke and looked up at the heavy net fencing above them that kept rocks from dropping onto the road. Some rocks hadn't been stopped by the net but had fallen onto the asphalt. Rob didn't slow down, but steered the car smoothly around the boulders in the road.

Hannah pushed her feet hard against the floor when he swerved close to the outside shoulder to miss a large rock. "Rob, shouldn't we stop and move those rocks off the road? Someone might hit them."

"The highway department takes care of that. There isn't any place to pull off the road if we did want to do it, and most of the rocks would be too heavy for us to move."

She looked into the canyon, a thousand feet down jagged, black stone cliffs to wild white water. She took a deep breath and forced her legs to relax. She said, "I'm glad we left early. We're out of the valley before the traffic gets too heavy. Some day, I'd like to spend a few days making this trip and really look at all the country we're driving through."

Rob said, "Lots of pretty country. Right from where we leave the valley, all the way into Oregon, and all the way home is all pretty country."

"Rob, if we ever bought a place and built, where would you want to live?"

"Maybe some of this country we're traveling through."

"Forests? Northern California? I wouldn't want to live in the desert."

"I like the Oregon desert. The Oregon desert isn't really desert. It isn't barren, just sparse."

"Too sparse. I like the desert, driving through or spending a little time there, but I wouldn't want to live there."

"You might like it better than you realize. You might live there a while and then discover you really liked it. The desert grows on you."

"I don't think it would grow on me, Rob. I wouldn't live there, so it wouldn't have the chance."

"What if I lived there? Then what?"

"Rob, do you plan to move to the desert?"

“No. But if an opportunity came along, I’d be interested.”

“This car makes traveling so much easier.”

“Sure does. Four in the pickup was getting tight, the way the girls are growing.”

“We couldn’t carry on a conversation like this in the pickup. It’s too noisy. My mother said, ‘Hannah, I wouldn’t give you a piece of junk. That’s a good car.’”

“It is, too. I still wanted to check everything out. I wouldn’t take even a new car on a six-hundred mile trip without checking it out, but it is a good car.”

“She didn’t like you putting your name on the title.”

“She settled down when I said it’s your car, without question, but both our names and ‘or the survivor’ just makes good sense on the title. But look who’s driving it.”

“You have my permission. I’m afraid I’d fall asleep. I might drive part of the way.”

North of Nubieber, meadows and hayfields bordered the highway and evergreen forest surrounded the meadows and hayfields They pulled off on a side road into the edge of timber, got out of the car, and sat in sunshine and ate. Rob said, “Were you sleeping, Melissa? I know Linda was, because I had to wake her up for breakfast.”

“I wasn’t. I liked it when it started to get light, and then we kept driving into more and more light.”

Rob said, “It would be nice to live around here somewhere. Some timber, a lot of open country.”

Hannah said, “I’d forgotten how lush it is in Northern California. There are still some really dense forests. I’d like to live in really dense forest.”

“I like dense forest. I don’t think I’d like to live in dense forest, though. You’d feel closed in, cut off from the sky.”

“Don’t say “you’d feel that,” as if I would.”

“You said you felt closed in at Lovelock.”

“Lovelock was down in a hollow. I could live in dense forest without living in a hollow. It didn’t bother me a lot, even in a hollow. Just sometimes.”

“You think you’d like it, but you’d miss the open sky. Your eyes need to look some distance.”

“You’d miss the open sky. Your eyes might need the distance, but you can’t decide for me. You don’t know more about what I like than I do, do you?”

“I might. Not in all areas. Not in very many areas. But there, in what kind of place are you still going to like in five or six years, I might actually know more than you do.”

“How could you?”

“I might not, too. If you were starting to get mad about it, then definitely I wouldn’t, but if we were still just exploring the subject in relaxed conversation, I might. I’m not saying I do, but just that it’s possible.”

Hannah stood up and walked away. Then she turned back and said, “Who needs anything more to eat before I put it away? Let’s walk a while and then go. I’d like to get home before dark.”

A few miles before the Oregon border, a lumber truck had skidded off the road and tipped over on its top. Lumber scattered behind and around the truck. The top of the cab was smashed in. A tow truck backed up to the upside down truck, and several men walked around the wreck.

Hannah and Rob and Melissa and Linda crossed the border from California into Oregon about noon. Sometimes they played tapes. Sometimes they left the music off, and they all talked, or Rob and Hannah talked together, and the girls played and talked together in the back. They rolled along the asphalt highway with Goose Lake on their left. Pelicans, sea gulls, geese, and ducks rested on the surface of the water, took to the air on powerful wings, flew above the lake, and glided to landings on the water again.

Hannah said, “Rob, I would like to live in dense forest.”

“Okay.”

“What made you say you knew what I’d want?”

“I think I was just trying to talk you out of it.”

“Why would you want to talk me out of it?”

“Because I know I couldn’t live in dense forest. After Lovelock, I knew I had to be in more open country. I was ready to get out and stand in the sun.”

“You really feel strongly about it, don’t you? You know for sure what you want.”

“I think so. I’m not totally set in my mind, but I know where I’d like to live, if we ever built our own place.”

“Stop at the store in Lakeview. I need to get groceries so we won’t have to go to town for a few days. We need to stop for lunch sometime soon.”

In the open country north of Lakeview, they drove away from the highway, stopped and walked, and ate lunch. Hannah said, “The woman in the store said the driver of that truck lived through the wreck. That’s all she knew. She didn’t know if he was injured or anything else about it, but she did say he lived through it.”

Rob said, “Do you want me to peel your orange, Linda?” He got the peel started, and Linda said she could do the rest. Rob said, “I like the country around here. This would be one choice. But not just out in the sagebrush flats. Back in the hills, there are creeks and canyons, or springs, and more timber. Meadows, cottonwood trees, and willow thickets, and thickets of lodgepole pine in some places.”

“Way off, a hundred miles from anything.”

“Twenty miles from the highway, probably, maybe fifteen. I don’t know of a specific place, but you’ve seen places like I’m talking about. A shallow canyon, with a lot of flat ground at the bottom, or a small valley with meadows, where a stream comes down, and the water irrigates all the way down, hay ground, pasture, gardens. Lot of those places, there’s a spring too, or you have a high water table, and you can tap it without enormous expense. I’d want to build high in south slope, so I can see a long ways, and garden the flat ground in the bottom.”

“You say it more like it’s a plan than just an idea.”

“It’s a dream. Didn’t you ask where I’d like to live if I could buy and build?”

“It sounds like you haven’t even thought of what I might like or not like in your plan.”

“No, no. It isn’t a plan. It’s a dream. Just a dream. If we got together enough money to buy a place, wouldn’t I consult you before I bought? Wouldn’t all four of us go together and look at places and talk about it? Melissa might say, ‘I like that place, because it has so much forest and meadow, and a lot of good places to walk,’ and maybe Linda would say,…”

“Rob.”

“What?”

“What makes you think you know how everybody feels?”

Melissa said, “That is probably what I’d say, because that’s what I’d be looking for.”

“Don’t back me up if you can help yourself, honey. I think I’m in or right at the edge of trouble, just by my own slipshod footwork.”

“Footwork?”

“Mouthwork, I guess, but I’d like to dance my way right on by trouble. Extricate myself by fancy footwork. Smoothly shift gears. If we want to be home before dark, we have to rededicate ourselves to that goal, pack up, and hit the road.”

Hannah said, “We want to be home before dark. Get in, and buckle up, and let’s go.”

Hannah played a tape of Vivaldi’s music. When it finished, Rob said, “Play that Doc Watson tape.” Doc Watson sang about lonely men and broken love.

Hannah said, “Why is it better to have both names on the title?”

“Both names and ‘or the survivor.’ That’s the way the title of the pickup is, remember? Suppose I’m falling trees, and a top comes out of a tree, and smack, that’s the end of me. If the pickup is in my name, you have to go through a legal process to get it put in your name, and you have to pay inheritance tax on it. It’s part of my estate. If it’s in both our names and ‘or the survivor,’ it’s your pickup. You’re the survivor.”

“Or if I die, the car is yours. Well, sure. It should be. You shouldn’t have to go through any paper work or pay taxes on it, because it would be yours and the girls.”

Linda and Melissa got tired of riding and wanted to run, so they stopped in the almost flat sagebrush country between Lake Abert and Wagontire.

Hannah said, “Watch for snakes. Are there any rattlesnakes around here, Rob?”

“I don’t know. There might be. Watch for snakes.”

When they were ready to go again, Rob said, “You drive, Hannah. It’s your car.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I like to have you drive.”

“Take it. Get used to the car. It’s flat, straight road. I won’t backseat drive, I promise.”

Hannah said, “All the lamps are filled, and the stoves are ready to go

when we get home. I'm really tired of riding. It won't matter that much if we get home after dark. Let's stop at Wagontire and have a soda and take a fairly long break."

When they were ready to leave Wagontire, she said, "Rob, would you drive again? How far is it from here?"

"About two hundred miles."

"I don't want to drive after dark. If you need some time to rest, I guess I'd better drive now."

"I can do it. You got yourself an easy-driving car. Remember the back problems we had after we made this trip in the pickup, because of that uneven seat? This car sits just right."

Burns Junction. Burns. North of Burns, Hannah said, "Do you like this country?"

"Sure. There's more forest. I like that. I mostly like whatever country I'm in."

"Except densely forested country."

"I like dense forest, too. I'm just not sure I'd want to live there. I might like it once I got started."

"Rob, that isn't what you said before."

"Here we come, into the megopolis of Seneca, girls. Population about seventy. Hannah, do you have the bank book with you?"

"In my purse, why?"

"How much do we have in the bank?"

"Fifteen hundred and ten dollars."

"Do you think I'll work this winter?"

"Not in three feet of snow."

"How much do you think we'll have in the bank by spring?"

"Zero."

"How likely do you think we are to have enough to make a down-payment on a place within five years, or ten years?"

"Probably not very likely." She looked at the country they were driving through, sparse timber scattered through sagebrush. Denser timber in some places, especially on ridges. She said, "I like the place we live a lot. I wish we owned it. You know, a lot of people don't even have homes. No place to live at all."

Rob turned on the headlights. The highway twisted through the

mountains. Hannah rocked with the steady turning and turning back of the birthday automobile lighting up the highway in the home stretch. She fell asleep.

And woke when they pulled into the driveway. They lighted lamps and started the stoves, carried everything in from the car, and took care of everything that needed to be taken care of. Then Linda and Melissa wanted to read some of their new books, but Hannah said, "It's bedtime. Tomorrow is a good time to start new books."

When Rob and Hannah finished everything else that had to be done and got into bed, Hannah said, "Let me see if I understand. You were going through a change. Maybe you would live in dense forest after all. Is that what you decided?"

"Yes. It wasn't a change so much as it was a realization that I'd probably misunderstood what I would do or wouldn't do. I overstated conclusions that were really only tentative." He lay on his back with his hands interwoven on the pillow behind his head and studied the boards in the ceiling, showing their rough grain in the soft moonlight that filled the room.

Hannah said, "Or maybe, since it's something we might never have to make a decision about, you felt safe saying whatever it took to keep the peace."

"Well, essentially. As long as it didn't call for any outright untruths. It's all entirely hypothetical, so why use time and energy trying to settle it?"

"That's your idea. It isn't mine. I'd rather talk about disagreements and misunderstandings and resolve them than sidestep them and pretend they're not there."

"Sure. Me too. It's all the rage. But getting everything settled in conversation doesn't mean it is settled. It's an illusion that can be hard to see through, but it is an illusion."

"This is all part of the fancy dancing you mentioned, a way to avoid being pinned down."

"I guess you could say that. I don't have an answer. I don't know. I'm not there now, so how can I tell? but finally, yes, of course, if that's where you lived, and I had to live there to be with you, sure I would live in dense forest. But I'd probably still own a chain saw, so sometimes when you went to town for groceries, I might cut a little here or there, just to open up

the view a little and make some firewood. I mean, I wouldn't thin it enough to hurt anything, just to open it up a little."

"Maybe you could build a place on the desert, and you could go live there by yourself whenever the dense forest seemed too enclosing."

"That's a lot better idea. That's a really good idea, Hannah."

She turned away from him and pulled the covers up over her shoulders.

"You can start practicing for it now."

Rob was sure Hannah was asleep within seconds of speaking. Maybe he would dress, slip out of the house and walk on the meadow for a while. He didn't feel sleepy, and the world still roared because he'd driven so long.

He would try to remember to talk less, to think more before he spoke. He often toyed with silly subjects in conversation and then was quietly astounded that Hannah took what he said so seriously. He needed to try to think of what she might think about something he said before he said it. He'd been telling himself that for years, but he didn't remember it, many crucial moments

*Maybe all the world's a stage to me, but to her, every part of the world is real. There is no stage, except where there is an actual stage. I need to remember that.*

He tried to understand differences between their ways of looking at the world and at each other. He didn't dress and walk in moonlight on the meadow. His intense thought about their communication slipped easily into dreams about communication with Hannah and its echoes through their years together. Cold moonlight cast their room, their house, the world around them to colors of gold, touched their dreams with golden tones.