

FICTION

Satellites

They roamed the University Hospital parking garage in search of his mother's Volvo wagon. He tried telling her they had parked at the very top. "The next level," she kept insisting. Each new level brought hope to her voice and confidence to her stride, so he bristled and nodded. Frozen air had needled his face raw by the time they finally spotted the car waiting under the lamplight. "I knew she was hiding up here," she said.

"Let me drive," he said, teeth chattering through the biting cold. "Your head's somewhere else."

"My head's right where it ought to be," his mother said.

She dug feverishly through her handbag. Now she couldn't find her keys. Defeat darkened her tired face, then embarrassment worked its way in. He leaned on the hood, arms crossed. His good luck sweater, roll-neck and stretched sleeves, laboured a valiant but pitiful defence against winds that whipped a paper cup silly.

"No coat?" she said. "Would you let the kids come east in February without proper coats?"

"Cardiac surgery is an indoor sport," he said. "I assumed we'd be in the hospital, at home, or *inside the car*."

"Very good. If you feel this is an appropriate time to pick on me, go ahead."

He gazed at the sky, sighed apologetically. The stars spread across the cloudless night like shattered glass. Her misremembering worried him.

"Ma, maybe the keys are in your hand," he said, softly.

"Do I seem that dense to you?"

She turned her back to him before he could answer, unfurled each finger clenching her handbag. She drew that short breath he knew too well, that intake of exasperation. "Go ahead," she said. "Say something smart."

"Let's get in the car."



Chantal Fournier

A pause of unspoken forgiveness passed between them and she unlocked the doors. She fumbled the key into the ignition. He blasted the heat.

"Dad's going to be fine," he hymned.

"I know," she said, a tinny amen.

His father had just received two new heart valves in surgery that stretched into evening. Afterward, caution creased the surgeon's face. Unexpected challenges presented themselves, he said. His mother blinked unemotionally as he described the surprisingly weak and flabby heart, the stress and extra work of adapting to new but unforgiving valves that no longer allowed blood to escape backwards. "The next 24 hours will tell us where we're heading," the surgeon said. "Go home. Get some sleep."

They descended one floor below, to level five, but she kept missing the exit ramp marked by curved arrows on the pavement.

"Turn here," he said as they passed the exit a second time.

"The signs should be larger," she said, staring at her dashboard.

"Try looking up. It's called situational awareness."

"I'm aware. Very aware." She turned quickly to prove her point. They were now returning to the top level. He squeezed his scalp. Blood rushed through his ears.

"Where are you going? Turn around. Please."

She thumbed at the "No entry" sign back over her shoulder.

"It's after 11. There's nobody here."

"What if somebody thinks 5 pm is a good time to ignore a sign, or picking up their kid on-time from school justifies breaking the law? The strength of your beliefs doesn't make something right."

"This is not the time to play nice," he snapped.

They inched along the top level as if exploring this terrain for the first time.

He caught her spying the console again, realized her fiery and treasonous look was aimed at the GPS. That morning, he didn't understand why she required navigational guidance from an airport she'd driven to for 40 years. "Road construction," she explained, though he couldn't find a single work sign, highway cone or hard hat.

"She sounds sexy," he had teased her. "*For a good time, make a right at the light.*"

"Leave her alone," she had said.

"Be careful. These GPSs can be vamps, leading the trusting against traffic on one-way streets, or smack into the middle of lakes."

"Not mine." Her undeniable faith unsettled him, even evoked a prick of jealousy.

The disembodied voice accompanied them on silent errands to Costco and the drug store, both within two miles from her home, a split ranch where he had grown up. The GPS was no help in the parking garage, however. There were basic, elemental tasks technology expected the human brain to handle alone.

They descended to the fourth level, but missed the next exit ramp.

"Let me have the wheel," he said. "Dad's heart surgery took less time."

She slammed the brakes. Screeching tires echoed in the torturous emptiness.

"I know what you're thinking," she said. "Should something happen to him, I won't be able to function. Your dad is the one with the sense of direction. He does all the driving." Tears fell, silently, and she slapped at them as if they were ravenous insects.

"I was thinking about getting home and taking a long piss," he said. But he was adjusting to his own unexpected shock of his father's condition after surgery. He wasn't prepared for the bloodless pallor, the booby-trapping wires and tubes and urgent alarms, his choking helplessness.

"If we can't find our way out of a parking garage, what are his chances of leaving the ICU?" he said.

"Get some sleep?" she sighed. "I'm expected to go home and close my eyes?"

They stared ahead to the smoky borders of the headlights. The hot air blowing from the heater couldn't touch his chill. His father might die. He wasn't ready to live his life with only memories of him. Like laughter, the shivering got worse the more he tried to repress it. His family and his home were far away. His kids, when they grow up, will probably flee him and his wife and come back east, and he wouldn't blame them.

She wiped her nose on her jacket sleeve. "Did I tell you how I got this warm coat? It was a return, so the price was slashed 50 percent. I talked them into giving me the 30 percent off store sale, too. *And I had a store credit.* This coat cost me four dollars and thirteen cents."

"That's great, ma."

"Four dollars and thirteen cents for essentially a new winter coat that originally sold for \$150."

She gripped the wheel stiffly, as if the car might buck and throw them. She was retired, her career formidable and rich with accolades. And yet, to defend her abilities, she chose a sale successfully bargained to the hilt.

She reached over and found his hand. Her fingers were still wet with her tears.

"Do you want my coat? You can use it as a blanket."

"Let's get going," he said, squeezing her hand, wondering when it became so small and frail. The car seemed too big for her, the parking garage a cruel maze.

"In 20 feet, make a left at the down-facing arrow."

He tried to sound serious, devoid of all mockery.

She hummed to herself, pretending not to listen.

"At the bottom of the ramp turn left."

She cut smooth turns; the wheels screaming as she boldly traversed down to street level.

"Pay the morbidly obese man in the booth," he said, and waited for the real GPS to locate them.

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CMAJ 2011. DOI:10.1503/cmaj.101395