



*The sporadic house or abandoned structure
appeared, disappeared.*

COUPLE

You couldn't see it but it was out there, the ocean, to their left and down, way down, concealed behind the dome of fog that had descended suddenly and cinematically and that for the last few miles had made driving increasingly problematic. He, for his part, concentrated on navigating the twists and turns of the sleepy two-lane highway as carefully as he could, slowing the car to less than ten miles per hour, then five, lurching forward grandma-like so that his nose almost touched the glass (and he could feel the coldness out there, too, the temperature dropping rapidly) as the whiteness consumed more and more of the world outside their windshield; and she, for her part, elicited a series of non-verbal murmurs meant to indicate her mounting fear and panic, having forgotten about her earlier bout of nausea/car sickness and their mild disagreement on the subject of the artistic merits of Wim Wenders, leaning back further and further into the factory-fresh plushness (the car was new, a recent present to himself) of her fully reclineable chair. Soon it got to where they couldn't discern oncoming traffic, the road's dotted yellow line, anything.

"Stop," she said finally. "Stop the car. Pull over. I can't see a damn thing. It's like a dream. We could go off the road and not even know it."

But just then the fog broke a little, then a little more, and they could once again see their headlights weakly illuminating the road, the strips of yellow demarcation and the curving landscape ahead of them. By then, however, they were in the other lane, the wrong lane. He swerved back, the motion startling her even though the car wasn't moving fast. Fortunately no cars had been coming from the other direction. Since this was a vacation, a coveted three-day weekend that they'd managed despite inflexible schedules and staggering workloads, they tried not

to think about it too much, death.

"How much longer you think?" she asked, knowing it was at least another half hour, perhaps longer, but wanting to say something, to put the chill of mortality behind them.

"Probably about another half hour, I'd say. You okay?"

"Yeah, fine."

"I could still pull over."

"No, it's fine. I'm fine."

They continued driving, watching the grim whiteness eventually recede. And there it was: the ocean. Dark, melancholy. The sky was growing dark, too, frosted with the first evidence of stars and moon.

"Are you sure you're sure?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "I'm fine. Really. I wouldn't say it if I wasn't."

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They were a couple, together. One of them had been married before. One of them had been in a long-term relationship that the person didn't like to talk about much. They were in no hurry. And so they lived in a tastefully decorated apartment, had an exotic-named cat, many plants and prints and hobbies (individually, collectively), but he, the man, had been having his doubts as of late, as men tend to do, and she, the woman, sensed these doubts and was doing all she could to try to understand them, as women tend to do.

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His boss had said this is totally last minute but his cabin up the coast was available for the weekend, this weekend, and if you don't have anything else going on then why not get out of town, escape, relax, debrief, come up for air. Actually, they did have something going on, but after an exchange of emails they agreed to cancel their plans and take advantage of the cabin, because how often do those kinds of offers

pop up (from your boss, no less), and true, they had been a little burnt out on the city and definitely could use a quick, revitalizing getaway. His boss had said cabin then corrected himself. "I say cabin because it's out in the woods, the middle of nowhere actually, but you've got all the amenities, all the comforts – TV, microwave, stereo, DVD player, espresso machine. It's yours if you want it."

Once they'd headed inland, away from the coast and the heavy ocean air, they made a wrong turn and then had to backtrack several miles. By now it was overwhelmingly dark. Street signs were few and far between, and even the ones that were there were difficult to see anyway. The sporadic house or abandoned structure appeared, disappeared. They slowed and argued. Where was this place? He turned off the radio to concentrate better. The headlights seemed inadequate, a dated technology. Nature was winning, would always win. She read the directions over and over, scrutinizing the piece of paper like it was a poem, seeking hidden meanings, deeper levels of language and mystery.

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All along it had been clear who needed whom more, and it was only a matter of time before this knowledge would be too much.

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Eventually they found it. Or thought they found it. It had to be it. There was nothing else. This seemed to be the right dirt road, the one that curved left and then right and then went straight for another two miles or so and then kind of dead-ended. Quoting the directions verbatim. They parked and walked up the gravel path that led to the cabin that wasn't really a cabin. The cold night air caused them both to shiver, accelerate their pace.

But the key wasn't in the boot. The key was supposed to be in the

boot that was underneath a bench on the front porch, but it wasn't there. There was no key. His boss said the key would be there. He kept looking and looking and looking. No key. The boot was empty.

"What do we do?" she asked.

"Try the door?" he suggested.

He tried the door. Locked. It was dark inside, outside, everywhere. Never in his life had the absence of light been so profound.

"Now what are we going to do?" she said.

"Please don't start," he said.

Next he went around the back, almost tripping twice on his way. He couldn't see a fucking thing. It was black and quiet and still, and he remembered why he didn't like the outdoors all that much, even though he had all the gear: tent, stove, inflatable mattresses. He inched along until he located what he hoped was the back door. Which was open. He found a light in the kitchen and then walked through the cabin turning on lights as he went and then opened the front door for her.

"This feels weird," she said, not coming in yet.

"He probably just spaced and forgot to put the key in the boot. That's all."

She came inside and he returned to the car to get their luggage, his footsteps amplified on the gravel path, rising out into the night like a distress signal.

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But the woman was having her doubts, too. It was more mutual than the man suspected, and when he delivers his speech, which is coming, which is constantly being honed and revised and replayed in his head, softened and hardened and softened again, she will be relieved as well.

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The first thing they did: have sex. This was the ritual. Whenever they vacationed and arrived at the hotel or bed and breakfast or wherever they happened to be staying, they immediately retreated to their room, locked the door, disrobed and made love. They couldn't say for sure when it had started (Kauai? Corsica? Venice?), but now it was as much a part of their traveling itinerary as seeing ruins and sipping cocktails at sunset. The fucking more drawn out, more intense and aching than the everyday fucking they did at home in their own apartment in their own bed. The different context added an edge, another presence almost. Vacation sex, they called it. And the first coupling of the trip was invariably the best: the most release, the most pleasure, the most raw and pure giving of themselves and their bodies to each other.

Afterward they explored their surroundings. Which, turns out, was really more like a cabin than his boss had led him to believe. The uncarpeted wooden floors creaked, were uneven. Air from outside penetrated the thin walls. Dust-shrouded knickknacks here and there, and lots of plaid. It was just a kitchen, a living room, a bathroom, a bedroom. Minimal furniture. There was a fireplace, but where was the TV? The stereo? The DVD player? The lone source of entertainment was a transistor radio, an object from another era. He turned it on and it was tuned to a big band station, static mingling with the buoyant, anachronistic horns. His boss and his boss's wife had been here the previous weekend, and his boss had said that there was plenty of food and plenty of wine and to please help themselves. But there was no food. There was no wine.

"How old are these people again?" she asked.

"Just a little older than us. He's thirty-five, maybe thirty-eight, I don't know exactly."

"Weird."

"Maybe they're just going for the authentic rustic thing."

"Maybe."

Later, when she was brushing her teeth in the bathroom, she called him over to the medicine cabinet.

"Look at this," she said.

It was all old people stuff: Ben-Gay, Doans, Metamucil.

"Maybe his wife is older," he said. "Maybe that's how he got the money to start the company."

"You've never seen her?"

"No, just heard. She kayaks and does yoga. That's all I know, basically."

They got into bed, depleted from the drive and the vacation sex. They had to pile several blankets on the bed to stay adequately warm. When they switched off the lights, the darkness again asserted itself: total consuming blackness. As obscuring as the fog from the drive. They couldn't see each other. They couldn't see anything.

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He was distant. He admitted this. He apologized about this. Repeatedly. She said it didn't matter if he said it all the time, that he was sorry about being distant (and remote, and, at times, unknowable), it still didn't change the fact that he was distant. I'm sorry, he'd say, yet again, like a mantra.

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In the morning they did not want to get out of bed because getting out of bed entailed driving back to the coast and heading south and stopping in the nearest town to buy food and coffee and supplies. So they lingered. It was a vacation after all. They drifted off to sleep again. The morning continuing outside, beyond them, unfathomable as a distant planet.

Footsteps. They woke to the sound of footsteps. In the living room. In the kitchen. The putting of cans on shelves. Water running, shutting off. They didn't look at each other. They didn't move.

Then the door to the bedroom opened. There was a woman stand-

ing there, an older woman. She let out a gasp and then a man rushed up behind her. He was older too.

“Who are you?” said the man. “What are you doing here?”

They were both naked. They couldn’t explain. He tried. She tried. They apologized. It was a mistake, a misunderstanding. They got lost but thought this was the right cabin. The key wasn’t in the boot. They should have known. All the clues. Looking back now. Sorry. So sorry. So very very sorry. The older woman was breathing heavily like she might have a heart attack or stroke. The older man tried to calm her, to tell her it was all right, it was nothing, these things happen, this is the world we live in now.

They grabbed their belongings as quickly as they could, scrambling like discovered adulterers, and ran out of the cabin.

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The drive back to the city was mostly silent. They were stunned. They were processing. But occasionally they’d say things like “Weird” or “What a trip” or “Did that really just happen?”

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And more than once (in fact, many, many times), while driving home, he thought of what he knew he must do but had not yet been able to bring himself to do, how he kept putting it off and making excuses and not now and soon and the timing’s not right and her birthday’s next week and the week after that it’s Valentine’s Day and then something else, always something else. Because this is what you do when you love someone but not enough.

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And more than once (in fact, many, many times), while driving home, she thought of the older woman and older man. How they seemed as one. As if one could not exist without the other. How was that possible? What was their life like? Were they happy? Were they sad? Did they really, truly know each other? How had they been able to make love last a lifetime? What was the secret? Or did they pretend just like everyone else?

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Getting closer, only a few more turns and blocks, she estimated, at a stoplight, waiting. Her eyes were closed and had been for some time, from before the bridge, before you got that postcard first glimpse of the city beckoning like a lover in the distance. The car didn't even make a sound, idling there.

"Are you awake?" he asked quietly, almost a whisper, the third time he'd voiced the gentle inquiry.

She didn't answer. Then the light must have turned green, because the car floated forward, back to life, sleek, smooth advancement.

But she was in fact awake. Had been the whole time she had her eyes closed. But when asked if she was awake, she wasn't ready to respond, to reenter the tunnel of their lives. Soon she would do that. There would be unpacking and dinner and Sunday and then work the day after that. But not yet. For just a little longer she wanted to be free, alone in her reveries and ruminations, feeling the car edge one way and then another, not knowing what was coming next, her body reacting to a force larger and greater than itself, herself.

So she kept her eyes closed and the car glided into another left and they waited at another stoplight and her eyes were still closed and she thought yet again of the older woman. The older woman with her long gray hair tamed by a long braided ponytail that was draped across her shoulder and down her chest. Her body short and squat and powerful. A woman of the past, from the past. She reminded her

of her grandmother, who also had long hair as an older woman and who told her to never cut her hair, no matter what she does, never ever cut her hair short like a man's. The older man was less vivid in memory, but she still could conjure a general composite: bald, thick-necked, flannel shirt, stronger than his years would indicate.

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It felt good to be home, a spilling relief, like they'd been away for weeks instead of less than a day. They parked their car in the garage below their apartment building, took the elevator to their floor. The door to the apartment was, curiously, unlocked. Had they forgotten to lock it? Probably, the way the whole weekend had been going. But they were hoping to salvage the situation by having dinner at their favorite neighborhood restaurant tonight. First, however, a nap, a much-needed, much-deserved, perspective-changing nap. It was still early. They went inside.

"I'm so tired I can't see straight," he said.

"I know," she said. "Me too. Everything's a blur."

Turning on the lights. Shedding baggage and clothes and keys. Checking in with the cat, who was more excited and affectionate than usual. Ignoring mail and messages on the answering machine. And then, finally, collapsing into their bedroom.

But they didn't get far before they noticed something was off, wrong. The hardwood floor seemed to sway. The walls began to spin. In their bed was another couple, a man and woman they didn't know, had never seen before, about their age, speechless, afraid, and ready to flee. ■