

Pamela Painter

Road Trip

They used the key her lover gave her six years ago to let themselves into his house. Brenda's arms were full with his bicycle helmet and hiking gear. "Pull—pull the knob slightly toward you," she told her daughter. The trick that allowed the door to open. Brenda remembered Galen's instructions from her first time here and his loving note—in neat handwriting she now considered cramped—that said "*mi casa es tu casa*."

Finny dramatically swept open the door. "And we are in!" She gestured for Brenda to enter first. "What if he's in bed with a cold?"

"He's a masochist; he'd be in the classroom with a cold," Brenda told her. She had counted on the fact that mid-morning on Wednesdays, he was always at the college. "Okay. Now what?" Finny said, tucking the key in Brenda's pocket.

Grateful for Finny's matter-of-fact attitude, Brenda told her that first they would bring in Galen's stuff and dump it in the couch area, then gather up hers to take home.

"Got it," Finny said, and went back outside to begin unloading the car. Alone, Brenda held Galen's red helmet against her cheek and breathed in the scent of his sweat, the cologne he always wore, and his abundant curly hair. As she set his helmet on the back of his reading chair, she realized that she had wanted to be in this house one more time.

"Mom?" Finny was back. She dumped a box on the couch.

"I'm good," Brenda said, because she had to be.

Together, they made several trips to carry in clothes, dopp kit, frayed tennis shoes, manuscripts, books, Galen's second clarinet. Finny showed no interest in any of his things, but she unabashedly peered around, as if assessing her mother's past life here with her lover. Maybe comparing it to her own recent romance. Then she gave a shrug as if dismissing it all, a shrug she probably thought Brenda didn't see.

"I recognize some of your stuff already," Finny said, rolling up a vest that Brenda had left draped over a dining room chair. "I mean, shit, how much stuff is there?"

"I hate the word 'stuff,'" Brenda said, ignoring "shit." Why hadn't she made this trip alone? So far, Finny had been little comfort. But is that what

she'd brought Finny for—for comfort? Or to ward against any temptation Brenda might have to wait for Galen's return.

"As in 'low on stuff,' Finny snorted. "Point it out. I'll carry."

A WEEK AGO, Galen had suggested that they meet halfway between Boston and Providence to trade belongings. He'd been unfaithful in a serious way. She'd been unfaithful too, but less seriously. She felt moderately bad about this. He said it was time to break up. He'd offered to pack up all her belongings that had found their way to his place and asked her to do the same with his. She told him her schedule for the next two weeks made this impossible, but she'd get back to him. She wasn't sure why his proposal felt unseemly, more so than this surreptitious trip on her own.

Last night, she'd called Finny to coerce her into joining her on the drive from Boston to Providence and back three or four hours total. It took two phone calls. Her first request with no particulars got a quick "Nope, can't do it." Miraculously, after Brenda's second call Finny grudgingly agreed to make the trip, saying Gabe would be busy the next few days. Recently, Finny had been giving her grief. Abrupt goodbyes on the phone. Cancelled dinners. Complaints about her brother and Brenda's ex-husband whose actions she seemed to attribute to Brenda. Not sure what this was about, Brenda hoped it wasn't about Finny's latest man.

She picked her daughter up at 8:00 on the dot, with two coffees-to-go. Finny took after Brenda curly golden hair, thin slivers of eyebrows, a full mouth.

"Did this god damn mystery trip have to be so early," Finny said, yanking open the car door. "And why couldn't you go yourself like you've done a million times before." She stopped short when she took in the condition of the crammed back seat. "Coffee?" Brenda said.

Finny settled her backpack on top of Galen's duffle. "Never mind," she said and belatedly planted a hello kiss on Brenda's cheek. Neither had bothered with lipstick.

Zooming along the highway she'd traversed countless times over the past six years, she told Finny her story's ups and downs, finally and reluctantly including a brief summary of their infidelities.

At that Finny said, "So? So what?"

"What do you mean 'so what?'"

"Well, they're a symptom not a cause, right. I mean what makes a relationship fail? Dumb word 'relationship'."

Sleepless nights hadn't quite provided Brenda with definitive answers, either to the distant past with Finny's father, or now. The proverbial straw could be many things. Finny nodded when Brenda mentioned Galen's "self-absorption" and "frugalities"—his insistence that all concert and theatre seats should be in the balcony, and his injunction against cutting a bouquet for their table from the profusion of tiger lilies in his yard. Oh. She remembered saying "oh" too often to his pronouncements. Then there were his bitter references to his mother's "voice in his ear." Brenda pictured that voice floating above his shoulder, a voice as large and concrete as the lamp on his bedside table—always there. "Does Brenda's hair have to be that curly?" he reported his mother as saying, and "She does have a large bosom." He alleged her judgments were a major grief to him, but Brenda had come to recognize his mother in his voice too many times.

"So it sounds like things are really over," Finny said.

Her eyes on the road, Brenda could feel Finny studying her for wobbles and tears. She told Finny that in turn he'd probably found her too extravagant, maybe too uncomplicated? Satisfied with Brenda's sturdy assurances, Finny put her feet up on the dash and said she never liked Galen and his know-it-all-attitude anyway.

Brenda silently took this in, leaving room for more, so Finny continued. "Even though he did seem to know it all, if you get what I mean."

Brenda nodded that she did. She still might love him a little, but as the cliché goes she probably didn't like him anymore.

Finny added, "I mean intelligence can be intoxicating." A beat later, she laughed and said, "I almost said even intelligence. . ." At this they both laughed meanly. Finny tilted her head at the packed back seat. "So, I take it we're making a delivery," she said.

"It will all be dead on arrival," Brenda said.

"Oh god, this has the makings of another family story I could do without," Finny said.

"So, do without. What about you and Gabe?" Brenda had asked.

"Could we just make this trip about you," Finny had said, putting her head back and shutting her eyes.

AFTER DUMPING THE rest of Galen's stuff in the living room, Brenda gave Finny a quick unembellished tour of the house. She marveled at how strange her continued sense of proprietorship was. Finny must have heard it in her voice, and followed her, petulantly opening drawers and slamming

them shut, pushing at doors. First, the efficient kitchen with—well there it was—two mugs beside the stove.

Finny gave one of them a push. “Did you ever consider that some woman might be here?”

“Foolishly, never,” Brenda told her, and quickly ushered her toward the downstairs study. Brenda hoped she hadn’t noticed the plastic honey bear beside the sink, its plump bear arms folded complacently over its plump bear belly. It was one of Brenda’s fetishes. She disliked bottles of dish soap with their promises of domestic happiness—Joy, Soft Comfort, Dawn. Her family had been washing dishes with “honey” for years. When had she given the honey bear to Galen? Not “presented” it, but merely replaced his ugly bottle of dish soap with a bear she filled with honey-colored liquid. Now the liquid was a putrid blue.

“This was my study,” she said, and pointed at her shelves of books. An empty shelf caught her unawares, and the half-filled box of books on the floor below testified to Galen’s intent to exorcise the house of her.

“Looks like our boy got started,” Finny said, giving the box a sharp kick.

“We’re going to finish,” Brenda said. She pointed to her old PC on the desk, papers scattered here and there.

Then, hardening her heart, she led the way upstairs to his chaotic study with its books and music stands, his collection of antique recorders, CDs everywhere, clothes hanging from his desk chair, even an unpacked suitcase splayed open on the floor from a trip they took to London a month ago. “The CDs with ‘B’ on them are mine,” she said.

“He’s sure not a neatnik,” Finny said.

“He said we have the same tolerance for mess,” she told Finny. Though he meant the degree of untidiness in their houses, not their lives, where this observation had proved to be untrue. She would miss traveling with him, his adventurous itineraries. Their back road wanderings in British Columbia, belatedly reading the guidebook’s injunction—no dirt roads without a winch, the expedition on decrepit camels in Turkey, the cruise in Greece, bear sitings in Newfoundland. His love of narrow gauge railroads, white truffles in Umbria. His patience when she stopped to sketch a detail of a Gaudi tile in Barcelona or a sleeve of a girl’s dress in a Dutch painting in Bruges. Some things she tried not to think about, like the bedroom across the hall where, in the first years they were together, he used to sing to her in bed.

Finny glanced at the rumpled blue spread, the flat pillows, as if dismissing them along with any thoughts they might have led her to entertain. "I only heard him play the clarinet once," Finny said, studying Brenda closely.

"Once was enough." Brenda filled Finny's arms with sweaters and skirts, and sent her down the stairs, staying behind to mourn the tiny concerts, his talent for going down on her, his blessings in bed. Lost.

She gathered up a pen from her bedside table, books, two pairs of reading glasses, dismayed that another woman was witness to their practicality. She swiped down her red silk bathrobe from its hook – to be washed clean of him.

"Done up here," she called, her voice breaking as she descended the stairs, red silk flapping against her legs.

Finny emerged from Brenda's study with a box of books topped off with a blue yoga mat. "I'm surprised at how much I recognize. You have two yoga mats."

"Could we please avoid an inventory," Brenda said.

"But you really lived part of your life here," Finny said, her sharp elbow opening the front door. Letting it slam shut.

So part of her life was gone? Over? Brenda gathered and packed. Finny carried.

As Brenda went from room to room, pointing at items to be taken out to her car: laptop, shelves of books, manuscripts, hair-dryer, CDs, yoga mat, racy lingerie she stuffed into a bag, Scrabble, coffee mugs, a tape dispenser, an Iron Clad roasting pan. They had agreed not to return any gifts, though Brenda wished she had the nerve to take the ivory-handled magnifying glass she gave him for Christmas.

She did feel petty as she tucked the roasting pan into a box, but he could buy his own. Same with the dehydrator she'd given him for drying mushrooms. He was an amateur mycologist and she would miss the magic of a questionable mushroom's spore prints appearing on a white paper towel. Then she remembered what she had not brought back of his—the unpublished novel. He had resurrected it when they first met, revised the ending, and ceremoniously handed over the manuscript for her to read. When she inquired, as she had learned to do, "Do you want comments and suggestions, or shall I read for entertainment," he said entertainment. She read all 600 pages, kept her misgivings to herself and assured him, not without a grain of truth, that she was entertained. When three dozen

agents had turned it down, he said with no irony “perhaps your comments, now.” But it was too late.

FINALLY, HIS HOUSE was scoured clean of her stuff.

Room by room, they did one last walk-through. Brenda stood in each room’s center as Finny orbited around her, pushed chairs sideways, swished curtains askew.

“Aren’t these yours?” Finny held up a pair of Brenda’s hiking boots for rescue.

Brenda nodded. Do women ever hike alone? Not without a dog. No dog. “I wouldn’t not have done it, not had these years,” Brenda said. It sounded like the truth, but she has been known to lie to herself. She looked to see if Finny believed her. Finny nodded that she understood, probably from experiences with her last two men. She was in a relationship now going on its third monogamous year, but it was a troubled one that Brenda suspected would die in the next few months. Brenda’s divorce from Finny’s father when she was only seventeen certainly had no lessons for any of them. Finny took the hiking boots, still caked with mud from the Appalachian trail, out to the car and returned fast as if to keep Brenda on track.

With Finny trailing after her, Brenda looked for a place to leave the key, and settled on the middle of the desk that had been hers.

“No note?” Finny said, leaning against the door frame. “Dear Know-it-All-Asshole.” Expecting Brenda’s sure objection to that word, she rolled her eyes and was clearly surprised when Brenda said, “Asshole gets no note.”

Finny said she’d drive. Brenda was dismayed that the car was so full—the remnants of her failed relationship obscuring the mirror’s rear view.

As they were leaving Galen’s driveway, Finny said “shit,” and put her foot to the brake. “I knew you should have kept the key. But never mind, I can go in through a window. You left something behind.”

Ignoring Brenda’s protests, Finny efficiently twisted up her long hair and pulled the scrunchy off her wrist to secure it. She meant business. She left the car running and slammed the door.

As Brenda watched in dismay, Finny easily pushed in the old-fashioned screen next to the front door and with a vigorous gymnastic maneuver, dove in headfirst. Then she waved grimly, replaced the screen, and disappeared. In ten seconds flat, she reappeared empty-handed, but with a lump in her left jacket pocket that Brenda couldn’t make out.

“I saved it, so now it’s mine,” Finny said. Her “mine” was underscored by how emphatically she squealed out of the drive.

“If it belongs to me, I get to decide,” Brenda said. “So, what is it?”

“No you don’t. You left it there. Left it in that weasel’s care. Abandoned it.”

“Enough. There’s bound to be mistakes in your future if the past two years are any clue.”

“So now it’s a mistake,” Finny countered. “You said you’d do it again.”

“That’s the mystery of mistakes,” Brenda said. For the second time she regretted bringing Finny along. As if she needed to set an arrow arcing into the future without Galen, but with a loving devoted daughter in her life. Sure.

“Whatever you’re thinking about Gabe and me is probably true,” Finny said a bit later as she drove into a Dunkin Donuts. “Remember this?” She wiggled the plastic honey bear that had once held honey in front of Brenda’s nose. “How could you give him this,” Finny accused her, as if only now she realized the breadth of Brenda’s life with Galen.

“You are damn well old enough to know why,” Brenda said, through a crumpled tissue. How could such a silly thing make her cry, but she was crying solid tears.

“You loved him,” Finny said, tapping the blue bear on top of the steering wheel. She was crying now too, maybe fearing what lay ahead for her.

“You can have his goddamn bear. It’s yours,” she told Finny, but she held out her hand and Finny let her have it. “This putrid blue is Dawn. Throw it out and buy your own Joy.” She settled the blue bear in the cup holder, where it sat Buddha-like.

“Nice. My own fucking Joy.”

As Finny pulled out into traffic, Brenda wondered what she made of this, her mother’s fractured life. Would she be a stronger young woman, wiser than her mother, or fearful for her own future? Maybe more realistic about love. No, Brenda shouldn’t wish that on anyone. And what would Galen think when he returned to find they had been ransacking his house. What would he notice first? His stuff in the living room, of course. But then the empty bookshelf beside the couch, the tomb-like space in the front hall closet? He would find the key when he went into her study—no, now the study. Would he miss the blue bear? What she did not imagine on this sad drive home was that later that evening he would call her. After

first objecting to her raid on his house, he would weep and plead with her to give them another chance, say that they were too hasty in breaking up, pledge his undying love. Which is what he did that very evening. Slowly, their stuff from that road trip's adventure migrated in reverse. Finny had the grace not to turn their trip into a story—yet, but she did not offer to return the bear. A month later from the height of a new wisdom acquired during her own recent break-up, she told Brenda, “No bear. You and Galen won't last.” And Brenda was afraid it was true.