

Raymond Low / TRAVERSE

It's quarter past eleven as I'm driving north on the Macdonald Cartier Freeway when I spot the station wagon on the side road, the driver waving his flashlight around like a beacon.

My mother and father were devoted Christians to the end, faithful to the sacred word. I have read the Bible three times already, twice by my own choosing. And although I am not the total saint my friends make me out to be, my religious devotion goes further than simply praising God on Sundays. I never walk by the homeless without handing over spare change, I never avoid charities, and much to the concern of my husband, I often pick up hitchhikers.

I slowly pull my car over behind the station wagon.

Don't you realize that honest, good people don't ever hitchhike? he would probably say to me right now. *You read the papers, you hear about all the weirdos out there. They don't care about good Samaritans, they only care about what they want to do. You're unimportant to them, Jen.*

I get out of the car, leaving the motor running and the door open. I hear the roar as other cars speed by. It is early February, and the dirt brown slush on the freeway sprays inches away from my feet.

"Need some help, sir?" I ask, approaching the man. He is of medium height, just a few inches taller than me. I guess he's in his forties, light brown hair, a narrow but full face obviously unshaven in the last two days or so. He shivers in his thin blue polo jacket; I feel sympathy for him already.

"Yeah. The motor's out." His body may be shaking but his voice is undaunted. "I've tried everything. It's dead. I was wondering if you could give me a lift."

I look over towards his car. The hood is up and I see the ugly mess of steel and oil.

"Where are you headed?" I ask.

"Lawrence Heights." And even before I can say anything, he adds, "Look, I know it's dark. You can just drop me off by the Etobicoke

train station. I can make it from there.”

I don’t bother to muse over his offer. I rarely do. “Well then, what are you standing out here in the cold for? Come on in.”

His face loosens up. “I really appreciate this — ”

“Ah, don’t mention it.”

I head back to the car as he secures his. I get in, reach over, unlock the door. He slides into the passenger seat with a sigh of relief. “You know, this is really embarrassing for me.” He rubs his bare hands for warmth. “I’ve never had to do this before. Car usually works fine, never given me any hassles. Picks the worst day to fall out on me. Thank you very much.”

“You’re welcome.” I smile as I pull the car back onto the freeway. “Trying to head home as soon as possible?”

He nods. “Yeah. I hear there’s gonna be another five centimetres of snow overnight.” There is a certain lack of tone in his voice I did not notice before, like someone just trying to make conversation.

“Five? I heard seven.”

“Either way, it’s a lot. A whole lot.” He is quiet for a moment but suddenly slaps himself in the forehead. “I’m sorry, I’ve been sitting here and I haven’t even introduced myself. My name’s Russell Kwerston.” He extends a hand and I shake it.

“Jenny Fischer.” I glance in the rearview mirror. I don’t enjoy looking like a total louse, even in front of strangers. I have dark orange hair, ending at my shoulders, and a small round face much like my mother. I am only thirty two, just another quality my husband thinks makes me a susceptible victim.

You’re a beautiful girl, Jen. You may not want to think so, but you’d be surprised at how people think of you. Some of it is not very comforting. At all.

We drive in silence for a few minutes. Outside the snow is starting to come down more rapidly, and I turn on the windshield wipers.

“Live around here, Jen?”

“No. Down by Scarborough.”

“House?”

“No, an apartment.”

“Is it new?”

I shrug. “Somewhat.”

“Scarborough. That’s quite a long drive.”

"Yeah it is."

"Coming back from work?"

I've always enjoyed talking to the people I pick up. It's always interesting to see and chat with a variety of people. It's a lot better than a quiet ride. But now every question seems too personal and it makes me feel uncomfortable.

"Yes."

"Good pay?"

"I'd say so."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"That's good. Where do you work?"

"Um ..."

He shifts so that he is looking directly at me. I don't like it and I begin to squirm in my seat.

"Are my questions making you nervous, Jen?" There is no friendliness in his voice, and I doubt he'd honestly care what answer I give.

"N-no. Of course not."

"I'll stop." He continues to stare. I turn on the radio. I look again in the rearview mirror. I look all around me. There are cars everywhere. They settle me down.

"Mind if I smoke?" he asks.

"Actually, smoke hurts my eyes."

"Does it?" he says in a motherly tone.

"Yes." My voice is hoarse.

"What else irritates you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Is there anything else that bothers you that I should know about?"

"No."

"Positive?"

"Yes."

"Don't be afraid — "

"I'm n — ... I'm not."

I can feel him staring at me more intently. I don't dare look back.

"I'm sorry. Am I making you nervous, Jen?" he says. He shakes his head as if scolding himself. "I'm sorry." He sits back normally, staring at the road ahead of him. "I really am."

I am beginning to sweat. "That's okay, Mr. Kw—"

"Russell. Please, call me Russell."

I nod. I know the train station is just north of Highway 409, but I'm also aware I'm very far from there. I listen to radio traffic reports, but they don't mean much to me. The reporter then goes through local news. The bank rate is down. Two teenagers were killed in a bus accident. A heroic fireman emerges from a burning building. Sports. The Leafs win again. A coach has been fired. I couldn't care less. Afterwards, they continue with their nightly selection of adult contemporary music.

I hear a car horn beep behind me, and I suddenly realize I'm driving ten miles per hour too slowly. I speed up. Russell hasn't said a word in about seven minutes. I wonder if he's fallen asleep. I slowly turn my head. He is wide awake, just reservedly serene. I try to understand how on earth I got myself into this predicament.

He played you for a fool, Jen. He put on a little fake smile, pretended to be such a nice fellow and you fell for it. And now you're driving, miles from home with an insane man beside you. You're so naive, Jen —

I block my husband's voice and try to reassure myself I'm going to be alright. Russell hasn't done anything yet to harm me physically. He's just talking. That's what a lot of the lunatics are about — talk. Manipulation. Making other people *think* they're crazy. Children do it all the time — pretending to be sick so they can miss a day of school; I'm surprised people haven't connected the two.

I suddenly realize I've forgotten to put on my seatbelt. I pull the strap over me, and the click triggers something in Russell, for he abruptly begins to breathe very deeply. He looks out the side window.

"I murdered someone today," he says.

I grip the wheel a bit tighter. A part of me laughs in skepticism; the other part begins to worry.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

"I don't know."

"Well I did. That's why I was out there in the first place." He taps his fingers on the dashboard. "Figured I'd just dump her somewhere in Mimico Valley. You know where that is? No? Anyways, it was damn easy. I'm thinking, there must be a hitch. So I'm driving back and what happens? Car trouble. Would you believe that? Would you be-

lieve that? What do they call that? *Irony*, I think is the word."

"What do you want?" I blurt out. "Do you want the car? Do you need money — "

"I don't want your money."

"You can take the car, just — "

"I don't *want* your goddamned car. Just drive."

I nod because I'm afraid of blurting out the wrong thing. He shifts around again and faces me. "I'm scaring you, aren't I?"

"No." My face is rigid.

"You aren't frightened?"

"No."

"You don't look like it." He eases his left arm around the headrest of my seat. "I know you are. It's alright to admit it, you know. We're all good friends, aren't we? Tell me you're at least a bit scared."

"Fine. I'm scared."

He takes notice of my tone. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"I don't believe you."

"Fine."

"I'm just trying to be friendly."

"And I'm just trying to keep my attention on the road."

A pause. "Are you married, Jen?"

"Yes I am."

"What's your husband's name?"

"Thomas."

"Happily married?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"You have any children, Jen?"

I'm silent for a moment. "That's none of your business."

He glares at me. "But Jen, I told you, we're friends." His right hand moves over and settles on my knee. "We're friends, right?"

I am beginning to snifle. I shake my head.

"No?"

I shake my head once more.

"No?" His hand slides upwards. "You know that's really disappoint-

ing. I'm really beginning to like you. Honestly. You sound like an interesting person. C'mon. I'm a good friend, right?" His hand stops on the inside of my thigh.

I begin to cry. Slowly. "Please stop."

He doesn't move an inch. "You have any children, Jen?" he repeats.

I am shivering enough for him to notice. "Yes. One. My son."

"What's his name?"

I begin to choke. "Please, I can't tell you — "

"Why not?" he asks innocently.

"Please. He's only a baby — "

"I just want his name, Jen. That's all."

"I'm sorry. Please — "

"What is it? Mark? Peter? Thomas Junior?"

"Please — "

He jams his hand between my legs, pushing me backwards. The air surges out of me, and I am too shocked to scream. He shouts into my ear so loudly I think I'm going to go crazy. "All I want is a damn name Jen. Is that too harsh a request? Do you think it matters if I know his name — "

I feel myself losing control of the car. It swerves to the left, and I barely miss the rail. I jerk back into the lane, and a car behind me sounds its horn. I barely hear it as I try to keep my eyes on the road ahead.

"What is your problem?" he continues. He does not appear to care we are on the highway and that I just missed causing an accident. He presses even harder now, and I'm not sure what I feel more, shame or pain.

"Please, I can't drive with you — " I begin to choke again. "Please."

"A simple request. That's all I'm asking for, Jen."

Now I am beginning to drive too slowly again. The same car beeps at me, then swerves to the next lane, speeding past.

"Does he have a name?"

"Darrin," I moan. "It's Darrin."

He lets go and sits back, straightening his jacket.

"Thank you. Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

I thrust the palm of my hand into my eyes to wipe away the tears.

My knees are weak, but somehow I am able to keep steady on the road. I'm tempted to pull over but I feel too sick; I need to keep moving. Besides, Russell would probably grow angry even before I could get out. I'd take the chance if I had the nerve. I dig into my jeans for a tissue. Something to relax me. His hand appears in front of my face with a kleenex. I take it and wipe my face dry.

"I want to apologize," he says after awhile.

I don't reply. He sounds completely sincere now, in a way that makes me angry.

"Will you forgive me?"

I nod just to please him for the moment.

His voice is calm. "When I say I consider you a friend, I mean it. You're very kind, you know. There's not too many people like you who would pick up a total stranger. Especially at night. You don't know how I felt when you pulled over. I'm curious ... why did you do it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"What persuaded you to stop? I know a hundred people who would never do what you did."

"That's just the way I am."

"And just who guides you to be the 'person you are'?"

"The Bible does."

He grins. "Ah. A religious follower. Darn. You don't strike me as a religious fanatic, Jen. Then again, I'm not very good with faces. You're a dying breed, wouldn't you say? My father was a Protestant. But I never followed that crap to begin with. Oh, he tried to bend me, but I was too rebellious to listen.

"I mean, it doesn't really get you anywhere, does it? Look at yourself, for instance. Here you are helping others to the last drop. Why? Because you think if you do, God'll be on your side forever. And now you're stuck in a car with me. How's your belief now?"

"I don't help others for success. I do it because I want to. The consequences I'm totally aware of. And I accept them." For once, my voice is stern.

"Is that you speaking, or just what you're taught?"

"I hear that constantly from my husband. You think I'm one of those people who'll believe anything, don't you?"

"No, no, I was just wondering. So you aren't the least bit con-

cerned?"

"About what?"

"Me."

"I'm concerned for my family. I'm not afraid of death." I turn off the radio; it's annoying me. "Besides, I don't believe you'd kill me."

"You don't? Why not?"

"You would've done it by now." He laughs. Not hysterically, but in a way I find discomfoting nonetheless.

"Very clever, Jen, I must say. You're right, I wouldn't. I don't make it a habit of going around killing people. In fact, I'm sort of regretting strangling her in the first place."

"Who is *'her'*?"

"My wife."

"You killed your wife?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"You want to know?"

"Yes. Tell me about her."

"Sheila? I met her in college. Wonderful little lady. Biology was her thing. But she was a cripple. Couldn't walk. People thought she was clumsy. They saw the wheelchair and they thought she lucked her way in.

"But I knew. And I fell in love. So after I finished my third year in marketing, I asked her to marry me. She was in her third semester, but she wasn't going anywhere with it, so she said: 'What the hell, let's do it.' It was wonderful, Jen. It really was. We even thought about adopting.

"But we never did. I mean, how can you take care of children when you have enough trouble taking care of your wife? I didn't know how hard it was until I moved in with her. Every day, the same old thing. I helped her into the bathtub. I helped her to the toilet. I was cooking, I was taking out the garbage, I was washing the clothes. I had to do everything manually. And I got tired of it."

"And that's why you killed her?" I ask.

He shakes his head.

"She just sat there, Jen. Ate all day, got fat. At first I was there for her. I loved lending a shoulder for her to lean on. But how can you

keep doing that every day when you know you've got to do this and then you've got to do that? Twelve years I put up with her."

"If you were so unhappy," I say, "then why did you spend twelve years with her?"

He shrugs. "I don't know." I am about to shake my head but think better of it and continue to listen.

"I'm not sure what got into me tonight. I just ... had enough, I suppose. I hit her. I've never hit her before ... sometimes I would scare her, but I never ... it just happened. I think I started yelling. I don't remember. Next thing I know, she's on the floor, and I'm on top of her, I've got my hands around her neck ... she was trying to say something, I don't know.

"Took her out to the backyard. Threw her into the backseat all covered up. I was thinking like a criminal, I couldn't believe it. I was honestly thinking nobody would notice if she disappeared. Shows you my intelligence. Drove out here about fifteen miles over the limit and dumped her in the valley.

"I'm not a killer, Jen. No matter what you think. I never planned this out. I never even thought about it before tonight."

He stops for a moment and there is silence in the car.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?"

"I'm not sure what to think," I say.

"Amuse me."

"I'm not going to judge you."

"Why not? If you picked up a paper and saw a headline, '*Man Strangles Handicapped Wife*', you'd have a pretty good idea of what to say. So why not now? Are you afraid of what I'm going to do?"

"Yes. Yes I am."

"I'm not crazy, Jen."

"I don't care."

"I didn't murder without reason."

"There is no reason for murder," I remind him.

He politely laughs. "Ah, one of the Commandments you hold so dear to your heart, right?"

"That's correct."

"You would not kill."

"No."

"Not even to protect your husband? Your son?"

I don't say anything.

"I'd like an answer."

I bite my lip. "I'm not sure."

"You see? But I know you would. You wouldn't think twice about it. You have your reasons to do so. I have mine. There's no difference."

"I think there is."

He nods. "Fair enough."

I notice for the first time I am sweating profusely. My shirt is soaked. I open a window and feel the chill hit my face. I look over at Russell. He sits back casually. I swear he looks like your everyday person.

"Do you believe in forgiveness?" he asks.

"Yes," I reply. "I suppose I do. Everybody has the right to be forgiven."

"Even me? After what I've done?"

I think it over. "Is that all you want?"

"Pardon?"

"Do you want forgiveness for what you've done?"

"I just want to know if what you say is true. So, would I be forgiven?"

"It depends on who you are asking for forgiveness."

"Would you?"

I shrug. "Yes."

He frowns inquisitively. "Wait a minute. A moment ago, you told me what I did was inexcusable, right?"

"Correct."

"And now you're telling me you'd forgive me."

"Religion works in strange ways."

"What if I hadn't killed my wife? What if I killed your husband? Would you still forgive me?"

"Probably not."

"So forgiveness is not absolute to you?"

"I guess not."

"That's what I thought."

"What's your point?"

"I didn't know there was one, Jen."

His voice is totally innocent, and I am reminded of the harmless looking man I picked up in the first place. The snow is starting to wind down, and I turn off the wipers.

"You didn't answer my question," he starts up again.

"And what question was that?"

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I like to hear your opinions, Jen. Living with Sheila after all these years, it's nice to engage in an intelligent conversation." He smiles.

"So, do you think I'm crazy?"

"No."

"No?"

"I think you're just a confused person who's been through a lot. But it doesn't mean you don't need help."

I brace for whatever anger he feels towards my criticism. He doesn't say anything. In fact, he seems to take it all in with the subtlety of a cat. He looks me in the face.

"Would you forgive me?"

I laugh. "I've already told you — "

"No, not for that. I mean for the way I've mistreated you. Whatever hell I've put you through. Would you ever forgive me for that?"

I look straight ahead as I muse over it. "Yes." And I mean it.

I see he is stunned.

"Thank you," he says. From the corner of my eye I see something in his face, a sadness that lies between regret and compassion. And a need. A desperate need to say something, even if only to a total stranger. But the expression dies just as quickly as it came and he turns away, looking straight ahead.

The freeway is becoming emptier and emptier. I think about my family. Darrin must be keeping his father up with his constant crying. He's going through those stages, like my sister predicted. I contemplate telling Thomas about tonight. I decide not to. He would never let me forget it, that's for sure. He'd tell as many people as he could, so they could see what a foolish person I was.

"Pull over," Russell orders without emotion. "Now."

I do as he says, without argument. I am totally unprepared for this. He said he wouldn't harm me, but I should have known better than to

depend on him standing by his words. I put the car in park. I have never considered death, never thought about it so strongly. In some naive way, a part of me thinks I'm going to live forever, that there's no way I could ever die, that I could find a safe solution to everything.

"What are you going to do now?" I ask quietly.

He frowns. "Nothing. We're here." He points, and I look to my left. Even from here, with the cold frosting the windows and the light snow flying around, I can see the train station. He opens the door and prepares to step out.

"I could report you to the police later on — " I begin to say. I don't know why I say it.

"Yes, I know."

"But I'm not going to."

He does not look surprised. Instead he nods. Getting out, he prepares to close the door but stops and leans in, looking straight into my eyes. I barely recognize his face.

"If there truly is a God," he says, "you will never have to deal with someone like me again."

I force a smile as he closes the door behind him, and I watch as he makes his way towards the station. He doesn't look back, and I observe his body getting smaller and smaller until it finally disappears. Exhaustion hits me, and I realize I've been sitting still for too long. I turn on the radio and drive home.