

## The Driver

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Frank yelled “What?” for the third time, and Maggie grabbed his arm. The DMV worker leaned over the counter, clasped her hands as though she was about to pray and repeated: “Press your forehead to the blue pad. Tell me when you see a red light and whether it’s on the right or left.”

Maggie examined the woman—her eyes were the color of green olives, a comforting color, and they lifted at the corners as she waited for Frank to situate himself at the machine.

“I’m ready,” Frank yelled.

“O.K., Mr. Harris. Please lean in a little more so that I can activate the test.” Frank shuffled his feet. “Good. Now tell me when you see a light.”

“I see one.”

“Which side, please?”

“Left. Hey, where’d it go?”

“They’ll appear and disappear, sweetie,” Maggie said. “You remember this test. We were here only a few months ago.”

Frank ignored—or didn’t hear—and leaned around the machine to face the woman, who was eyeing the sizable line behind them. She seemed stoic about the room full of people who were waiting to be seen as though she knew the line had no end, so why rush?

“I’m ready. You can turn it back on.”

“It’s on, Mr. Harris,” the woman said. She smiled, exposing a sizable gap between her front teeth. Maggie felt the slickness of her veneers with her tongue and wondered what this

woman's life was like, whether she had a family. She eyed the girl's ring-less hand and thought *good girl*.

"Left!" Frank yelled.

Frank was Maggie's second husband, the second redhead she'd married, which she often thought quite the coincidence. Jessie had been tall, like Frank, and wore a short beard below light brown eyes. Frank had blue eyes, pale and permanently narrowed, and he kept a clean shave, and he was far more sensitive—a word he asked her not to use in any sentence with his name in it—than Jesse had been. She admired Frank's emotional honesty.

"Left. Center. Left—of center—"

"It doesn't look like your vision is too good on the right side," the sweet, gap-toothed woman said.

Frank took in the news, as though he hadn't considered this outcome possible. He squinted at the girl and asked, "Oh yeah? Those lights were shining on the right, huh?"

"Well, you can still get that license renewed with restrictions if you pass the regular vision test. This'll be just like the eye doctor."

Maggie read the letters: "AMESP."

Frank began: "Easy stuff here. A—W—F—S—B."

"Almost," Maggie said, deciding she would make lamb shanks tonight, serve them with asparagus and a good bottle of merlot.

"Mr. Harris, can you read anything lower than that top line?"

"Well yeah, but it's all blurry." Someone behind them chuckled. Maggie glared back, searching the room. Maggie was twenty years younger than Frank. She'd married him a year after Jessie died. Some said that she'd been too quick to remarry. But to Maggie, that year might

as well have been ten. She often relived the day she lost Jesse. The way he'd reached for a single piece of cinnamon raisin toast after his morning run and, suddenly, collapsed. The thick, ceramic plate he'd been holding landed beside him and bounced without breaking. Everything shifted.

“O.K., Mr. Harris. Try the third line for me.”

“I have something in my eye.” Frank shuffled back a pace and blinked a few times before taking a deep breath like a runner getting a second wind. He was wearing his jean overalls: his favorite outfit, the outfit Maggie dreamed of tossing into their fireplace if only she could get the nerve. She hated the way the heavy jean material hung from his skinny frame, the way the pale blue made him look even older, outdated. She began to rub his back. Frank would live a long time, despite his failing senses. He was honest, a trait that gives any living thing endurance. Maggie had watched as silence killed her first husband; it was his inability to show emotion, to let go. Jesse had combated fear, pain, sadness and even joy with silence; silence that ate him alive. It was a kind silence. He didn't want to hurt her feelings. Frank, on the other hand, kept his emotions on permanent display, and so he had a strong heart, strong lungs and an impressive set of ropy muscles. His temper kept him lean, gave him purpose.

Maggie looked back at the long line of people behind them. A teenager with pocked skin and tight jeans watched Frank with interest. He was probably the one who had laughed, she thought; he probably thought that the old man didn't have a snowball's chance in Hell. Or maybe these were Maggie's thoughts imposed on the boy. Maybe he wasn't thinking beyond his own nose. Teenagers, in their virtual worlds, useless messages forever blasting in their ear phones—things that looked like bright hearing aides nowadays—often thought of nothing at all because they were too over-stimulated to think actual thoughts. Everything was a blur.

Maggie imagined that she and Frank were invisible to young people. Years ago, it happened a few times that a stranger would pull Maggie aside, ask her why she stayed with such a verbally abusive man. The fact that this no longer occurred bothered Maggie. Sure, the boy behind them saw and heard this old, loud couple of which she was half, but he didn't process them, their existence. They were merely part of the background, an inconvenient part.

When they'd first been married, Maggie wasn't bothered by the non-stop commentary about the mismatch of their ages; but in the last few years, as she entered her sixties, she realized she had reached an age where it seems such things ceased to matter to the outside world, and this hurt more. She would be nothing more than *old* for the rest of her life.

Frank moved back up to the line and squinted. Maggie glanced back at the teenager and said, "He's almost done."

The teenager shrugged and removed a small white piece of plastic from his right ear. He was shifting his weight. "I'm in no hurry, really," he said, tucking his fingers into his pants pocket, which seemed to strain the fabric. Only yesterday, it seemed to Maggie, young people were wearing their pants too loose, and now it seemed they thought cutting off circulation was thing to do. She wondered if this new, tight look might cause a person to become infertile; she recalled one of her doctors accusing her of wearing too much elastic in her youth, not allowing proper circulation. This thought worried her.

Robert, Frank's brother, had once joked that Maggie was far too attractive to be married to his brother. It was the sort of compliment that still caused Maggie to blush a little. But Robert went on, speculating that she had only been attracted to Frank because she had an unfulfilled maternal instinct. He'd said this over a Trivial Pursuit board; he was recently retired and probably watching too much Dr. Phil, she thought, but when she looked to Frank to defend her,

she saw him laughing, saying how lucky he was for her malfunctioning ovaries. She laughed too, and although it usually took more than pop-psychology and bad jokes to offend her, she quickly found herself swallowing back salt until, eventually, she had to excuse herself.

“They all look like Es to me,” Frank was saying.

“This is my second time,” the teenager said to Maggie, just when she thought he’d never answer. “I can’t seem to get the parallel parking thing.” Maggie could see the boy’s nerves working from his shifting to position to his widened brown eyes.

“You’ll get it today. I have a feeling,” Maggie said. She patted the boy on the side of his skinny arm and turned back toward her husband in just enough time to reach for his hand as the bad news arrived.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Harris. Perhaps you just need new glasses.”

“I’ll be back,” Frank said, firmly. “Come on, Maggie. Give me the keys. We’re going to the IHOP.”

“Good luck,” Maggie called back to the teenager as she was led away. The teenager gave a shaky smile. This kid wasn’t numb at all; he was left alone to his fear, she could see, and she wished she could stay and hold his hand. He wanted this, too, she could tell, as he waved goodbye.

“Get in the car,” Frank said. Maggie considered her husband a moment as he stood by the driver’s side of their truck.

“I’ll be damned if I’m going to IHOP,” she said; and so it began. Husband and wife bickered: sharp words, rolling eyes, until the discomfort of Frank’s new reality dissolved, and Maggie took the keys. She turned on the ignition and felt the swift kick of the engine before it settled into a comfortable hum.

