

Glenn Dwiggins

Suzy Q

This is what probably happened. Vera looked out the window the following morning, watched the gray stormclouds withdrawing from the sky like curtains. She then might have seen the blinding pinpoints of light from the drops on the tomato vines that clung to the trellis leaning on the shed. She may have also noticed the wet shaggy-dog smell of the morning as she followed with her eyes the silvery slime trails left by the retreating snails, which felt the air warming. All this she would process into one sentence:

“Suzy Q got wet last night.”

The hell with Suzy Q, would be what Silas, that’s her husband, thought.

“The heck with the damn car,” he would say. That’s the way he was, and most likely still is. He would verbally echo his every thought. You could tell by the way he talked that he thought in short, relevant sentences of five words or less. He would think, there go the chickens, and a second later say, “There go the chickens.”

Whatever really happened that morning, at least one thing was different. I was not there. Neither was Suzy Q. Silas did not

know that yet, but Vera did. She knew of a lot of things that Silas didn't.

There is the matter of the car. Suzy Q, a fire-orange Jaguar E-type with a chrome scowl, one good eye and a tear in the top, became a device for communication for Vera and me, the live-in household maintenance-man. When Silas was in town making cabinets or something, Vera watched me as I tuned each carburetor until the motor purred softly. During the three months of dry and warm and dust that settled on Suzy Q's smooth curves, Vera and I would wash it, dressed in our swimsuits. That was before last night's rain.

The car was hers by inheritance. He hated it. He thought she loved it more than him. This wasn't true. I knew that more because of what she didn't say about him than what she did say. That's how she was, and most likely still is. People don't change overnight. Anyway, she gave him her love, and last night, as the rain fell, she gave me Suzy Q, proving me right, and Silas wrong.

They had a garden—he had the garden really. My main duty there was insect control. Silas liked to think he had everything but spareribs growing in it. That's what he said, like this:

“Got nearly everything growing in there. But spareribs.” He was quite proud of it. He said so. He never let me go into the garden alone, unsupervised, when he was home. When I went in to get some herbs for Vera, he'd say, “Don't cut too much. Got to grow back,” and then follow me in. On hot days, sitting on the black soil, I would forget the heavy heat and the drops of sweat forming on my forehead and under my shirt, sliding like bugs crawling down my back. I was drunk with those moist, dense smells: the mint, the rosemary, the marjoram, the parsley. “People misunderstand parsley,” Silas once said, “Try it on a burger, for lettuce.” I said nothing, sat there stewing or marinating in the warm odors, and pulled leaves

off the tomato vines. Out there in the garden, even with Silas's droning commentary on his thoughts about herbs and vegetables, and the frequent low-flying buzz, it was always silent, calm, even quieter than in my bed at night, where my amplified breathing and the crickets' racket receded only when I entered my loud dreams.

I once watched Silas gently lift a damaged patch of basil I had accidentally stepped on, combing it up between his thick fingers, spraying it with water, until it stood up again on its own. "You just knocked it unconscious," he said. He sighed. "People don't understand plants."

Vera was looking out the nearby kitchen window, smiling and squinting in the sunlight. "Where's my marjoram?" she said.

"Come get it yourself," Silas said.

"In that filth?" She laughed and closed the window. Silas flung a soft dirtclod quickly after. It hit the glass and made a sort of 'thupff' noise. Vera stuck her tongue out.

"She's some woman," Silas said. I said nothing. He was right; he often was, except of course about him and the car, and which she loved better.

I stand now at the edge of a cliff overlooking the countryside, watching the sun rise and the clouds retreating like curtains. Somewhere down there, among the mixture, a house here, a barn there, there a church, next to an industrial plant or a drunken checkerboard patch of farmland, is Vera, probably looking out the window in her bathrobe, not so carefully tied around her body, talking about her car like a pet, and of course Silas, talking about it like a scrap heap. "What's wrong with the Chevy?" he might be saying.

She is also probably wondering where I am, for unlike Silas, she knows I am not there, for unlike Silas, she was there when I was on my way out, on that rainy night. I was at the kitchen door, sliding on my leather jacket, when she came to me, in the same bathrobe, her perfume almost completely worn off. I liked that

faint-flower smell almost as much as that of the garden. As she approached, bare feet making a soft slapping sound on the hardwood floor, I could tell she was finding ways to stop me from going, formulating questions and arguments. As I was about to put on the helmet to the motorcycle I rode here, she said, "It's raining. Take the car. Here's the keys." I looked at her. The robe hung loosely on her body. I had never seen that much of her before. She was probably aware of this, but she only said, "Don't worry. Silas won't miss it. I'll tell him that I don't care to get it back." I was getting hot in my jacket, so I said okay, some sort of thanks, and left.

I think now about Vera, how she was that night, even though the flowers along this cliffedge are daisies, not lilacs, the scent of her perfume. I think of how she made me feel, particularly inside my jeans, when she smiled at me over the chromed engine of Suzy Q, and when she handed me the cold, shiny keys last night. I look at the car, the orange splashed with gray-brown mud, and remember how Silas hated it, his wife's most valued possession. I wonder about love. I think about what it is not, like logical and predictable. I remember that time in the garden, how Vera and Silas looked at and talked to each other, as if they shared a secret, in which I seemed to be involved, but was never allowed to share. I remember the smell of mixed lilacs, gas and grease as Vera and I took Suzy Q out for trial runs, her in the passenger seat, long brown hair slapping against the seatback, the three of us winding along the curvy mountain road, myself, Vera, and . . .

Suzy Q had taken in quite a bit of water already. The dry weather had lulled us into neglecting to cover the car at night. The leather seats were wet and had that wet-leather smell.

As I drove, the road was fast turning to slippery chocolate, and I had only the one headlight and my memory to guide me along through the rain, which fell hard. My face was constantly getting

wet from the water coming in through the hole. Then the sensation came to me, a feeling that Vera was in the car with me. Looking over at the empty seat only strengthened the sensation. I noticed the lilac-scented “Chippendales” air freshener. I knew it was there, but I’ve never been in the car alone before. I drove into the night, sensing her presence as strongly as I did her absence. The rain grew unbearable. I saw a sign with an arrow flash ahead of me. It said, “Vista Point.” I pulled over and fell asleep, with my jacket covering the hole in the top.

Birds are now flying overhead, some squawking in pleasure over discovering snails which didn’t find cover in time, others just happy that the rain has stopped. Some of the farm machinery has been started up, and the growling, burbling sounds are occasionally sent up by the breeze, blowing up the face of the cliff like waves.

I walk back to the car, knowing that the feeling that Vera is in there will be gone. As I start the engine, which speaks for itself, I think of Silas, who once told me, “A perfect garden takes work. Time and work.”