Going South

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My mother is in a hurry, but I’m not sure where she wants to go.

She sits up, excitedly, in the second-hand wheelchair, its armrests newly patched with packing tape, propelling herself with her good foot toward the farmhouse door. “Dammit,” she says, as her bad foot gets hung up on the ancient stove. “I want to go,” she says, ramming the sagging footrest against the oven door. “I want to go…” but the word she wants won’t come. She is halted here, aphasia trapping her words as surely as she herself is caught in this dingy, crumb-spattered kitchen.

Pausing, she starts over.

“There’s a building,” she says. “Down there, you know.” She searches my face, willing me to understand. “The most beautiful one I ever saw. I want to see it. I want to go. Now.”

“A building?” I ask, confused. I doubt mostly because I know her, know that only a blessed obliviousness to buildings has allowed her to live happily here in this sagging, neglected farmhouse with its peeling paint and smelly corners.

“What kind of building?” I ask, though she probably can’t say. At 84, Mom has spent the last eight years hobbled by brain surgery that left her unable to speak clearly, walk, or use her right hand. The aphasia, though, is the worst. Words balk, hide, refuse to come entirely.

“I don’t know—there’s a big sign,” she says pointing off, away from the farmhouse. “You go south.”

I hesitate, afraid to go out alone with her, without help to lift her in and out of the car. What would happen if she needed, suddenly, to go to the bathroom, as she often does? The farmhouse is isolated. I don’t know these back roads well and can’t say where we’d end up.

“I need to go to the store anyway,” Mom says then, and I can tell she is grasping. “We need things.”

“No, we don’t,” interjects Louie, my stepfather, who had appeared to be napping in his naugahyde chair. “What are you going to buy at the store?” Louie asks, angrily. “There’s nothing we need.”

As Louie sees it, people think they need altogether too much these days, and he’s determined to need almost nothing. Louie takes care of Mom, an exhausting job he does with mostly gruff adequacy. Ever since he brought her home from the nursing home where she was parked for a year after the second, debilitating brain surgery, Louie has insisted on going without. The nursing home cost too much, he insisted. They overfed Mom, babied her. She got soft and lazy there; he was sure of it.
Softness disgusts Louie more than anything else about the world today. It’s why he won’t have air conditioning in the pickup, and chafes when we bring electric fans to cool the farmhouse. It’s why he still farms at 89, an age when virtually all his peers have moved on, either to town or to the graveyard. It’s why he does it organically—no shortcuts, none of what he calls “clowned” or “harmoned” cattle, no genetically modified soybeans or Roundup Ready corn. Mom has always been right there with him, too—buying only second hand clothes, diluting generic dish soap to stretch it just a little further, refusing to move into the modern house on the farmstead that Louie rents out. He didn’t like the idea of moving, she explained, “and besides, it’s too fancy for me.”

But all of Louie’s cut corners have stranded her here. She needs a softer view now, and I know it has to come from me.

“It’s fine,” I say. “We don’t have to go to the store. We’ll just see what we can see. It isn’t a big deal.”

However dubious I am about our destination, it can’t outweigh the fact that I feel like a really bad daughter most of the time now. I can’t protect her against age and illness. I can’t heal her wounded brain, fend off her doctors, soften her husband. Instead, I make amends with small gifts—a loaf of crusty bread, a Louie Prima CD, lilacs in a mason jar. This little drive to nowhere would be just such a gift.

I struggle to get Mom out the door with its cracked glass and broken hinge. Louie, after a short inner scuffle between his anger and his innate need to be helpful, follows us down the disintegrating sidewalk, through the sagging gate, and then—without meeting my eyes—easily lifts Mom out of the wheelchair and into the too-low front seat of my car. Once she is buckled in, the chair stowed in the trunk, she and I head out the driveway. Knowing that Mom wants me to follow her directions, we veer left and head south over southern Iowa hills so green I find myself thinking of Ireland.

All that gentle beauty calms me, helps fade the picture in my head of my stepfather’s angry face as he watched us drive away. There was a time when I found Louie admirable, thought his stubborn dedication to hard work and doing things the old way charmingly idiosyncratic. Though conversation with Louie has always been impossible, I liked his wiry strength, his fierce blue eyes. He resembled those smart, extra healthy charollet cattle of his who were perpetually escaping through the sloppily patched fences. But that was back in the days when Mom cooked, cleaned, and tended their old farmhouse, back when she could get herself to the bathroom, when she could still charm him into regularly using a washrag (Louie doesn’t bathe) and occasionally applying deodorant before they headed out on their round of dances and political meetings. Louie has long supported both the NRA and the Sierra Club, listened religiously to Paul Harvey, and steered all conversations to the mysterious—but to him undeniable—connection between failing public schools, use of farm chemicals, and modern parents who won’t spank their children. Back then, Mom could still argue him out of his most ridiculous ideological stands or happily cancel his vote when he failed to budge.

Louie is Mom’s third husband, and she married him 18 years ago with few expectations. On most important things, they were of one mind. It was essential, they agreed, to dance several
times a week, to keep busy with meetings, gardening, and politics; their relationship was built on that agreement. I liked Louie back then, back before Mom grew suddenly, devastatingly, old and sick. Back when she still had the power to leaven his harshness. Back before she became a hostage to his rigid view of the world.

Most people think of time as a mellowing force, but I know it is no such thing. Watching my mother and Louie steep together in the brine of advanced age, I know that growing old distills some people into their most distinct and rigid qualities. Thrift cooks down to obsessive cheapness, vanity curdles into hyperrcriticalism, and a once admirably willful person turns nearly to stone with stubbornness. In Louie's case, his three essential elements—frugality, stubbornness, and resistance to change—have simmered together. The resulting stew means that nothing gets fixed, bought, or altered if Louie has anything to say about it. At the farmhouse, where he has lived all his life, broken windows don’t get repaired, cracked plates remain in the cupboard. If the milk goes sour, you drink it down without a flinch. For him it is a matter of principle—not necessity, as most people understand it. Louie has money in the bank, a fair amount of it, I suspect, though he refuses to fill out any of the financial forms required for government insurance programs.

“Nobody in the government needs to know how much I got,” he insists, impervious to our arguments about practicality, entitlement, procedure.

Money is the reason Louie stopped giving Mom her pills--the small white ones for blood pressure and the capsules to prevent seizures. They cost too much, Louie said, and they made her “owly.” At first the lapsed prescriptions infuriated me, but she has gotten along fine without them for more than a year. Her blood pressure is perfect. Seizures come and go, exactly as they did when she was medicated to prevent them. I suspect money is also the reason Louie refuses to consider moving to town, to a place that would accommodate Mom’s wheelchair, with reliable heat and a sewer that isn’t backing up all the time, where they could take advantage of congregate meals, and home health services. None of that is for Louie and is thus not available to Mom. I have consulted lawyers, social workers, Mom’s family doctor. They all say the same thing: as Mom’s husband, Louie calls the shots. Unless we can prove that he isn’t feeding her, or find signs of physical abuse, he is in charge.

“I have to put up with it, with him,” Mom says to me on the phone, after an especially bad day. At this late stage, I can’t tell her any different. It is the deal she has struck, the contract she signed with each of her husbands, of whom Louie is unquestionably the best: marriage obviates dissent. When you tie yourself to a man, you tie your own hands. I don’t agree, but now is not the time to argue.

Wifely dependence is ugly and out of fashion, a yoke I don’t have to wear. And yet for Mom, independence was ugly, too. In her life, being alone meant raising five kids without help or support, spending days cleaning hospital rooms and tending to other women’s laundry and children, then returning home to kill chickens and weed a garden so we had enough to eat. Marriage freed her from that struggle, and until recently I could hardly argue that it wasn’t a bargain.
And so on this day—the day Mom wants to go for a ride—I know that this is one thing, one small escape, I can offer.

So we get in the car and drive south. South past the sanitation company, south past the dirt race track, south past a fallen down farm complex, and suddenly the view is so simple and so lovely we both gasp.

“It is pretty back here,” I say.

“Yes, it is. It, it…it’s old.” That last word spilled off her tongue in a way that tells me it isn’t the word she wanted or the one she meant. Like so many of her words these days, it is simply the one that comes out.

“I don’t see any beautiful buildings out here, though.”

“No. Me neither. Maybe I was wrong about the direction. I’m not too, too,…you know. I’m not too smart these days.”

And again she searches my face, willing me to understand.

“Mom, you are one of the smartest people I know,” I say. “And it doesn’t matter, finding the building.”

“No, you’re right,” Mom says, leaning back. “All I wanted was a ride.”