

Just Drive, She Said  
a short story by Richard Paul Russo

Night.

Ahead of us, the road ended at a washed-out bridge, but we were driving for it at eighty-five miles an hour. Moonlight lit the barricades, the ruins of the bridge dangling over muddy water below.

"Jesus!" I said, trying to look at her. She pressed the gun harder into my temple.

"Just drive," she said.

I drove.

It wasn't even my car.

It was my sister's, an ugly-brown Mazda RX-7 that drove fast and smooth. I'd borrowed it for a few days, and Friday night I drove to a nearby liquor store to pick up some wine--something to get me through another empty weekend.

I was inside for fifteen or twenty minutes. With three bottles of wine in hand, I walked back to the car. I unlocked the door, opened it, and the overhead light went on.

A woman sat in the passenger seat pointing a gun at me. She didn't move, silent and intense, and I thought she was trying to decide whether or not to shoot me.

"Get inside and close the door," she finally said.

I wasn't going to do anything stupid. I got in, closed the door, and the light went off.

The woman took the wine from me with one hand, and with the other jabbed the gun into my ribs.

"Start the engine," she said.

As I did, strange lights went on in the middle of the dash. The tape deck was gone, replaced by a larger, glistening piece of electronics with dozens of buttons, dials, and readouts. Amber and green lights flickered across the thing, the displays showing figures that were probably letters or numbers, though nothing I recognized.

"What the hell is that?" I asked.

"A probability wave console. Generator, tuner, and amplifier."

Jesus, hijacked by a lunatic.

She jabbed me again with the gun, and said, "Let's go."

"This isn't my car," I told her.

"You think I give a shit?"

No, guess not. "My sister's waiting for me," I said, without much hope.

"Want me to repeat what I just said?"

I shook my head. "Where to?"

"Just go right and drive a while," she said.

The gun was still in my ribs, so I did what she asked.

Her hair was short and dark, and she was wearing blue jeans, a gray sweatshirt, and dark boots. Slim, but strong-looking. She didn't look crazy, I thought, but then what did crazy look like?

As I drove along, she fiddled with the console, and a stream of figures moved across the largest display. She glanced up, nodded toward a wrecked Toyota ahead of us on the side of the road, and said, "That used to be my car." We passed the wreck, and she returned her attention to the console. A blue light began to blink frantically on the side of the console.

"Goddammit," the woman said. "How the hell did she find me so soon?" She pushed another button and a small screen emerged from the top of the console. A glowing map appeared on the screen, with two different blinking lights a few inches apart.

"Turn right at the next corner," she said, "and hit the gas. Move this crate."

I turned and accelerated. Traffic was light, but I still had to pay attention to other cars.

"Faster," the woman said.

"What about the police?" I asked. Which was a stupid question. I wanted the police.

"Fuck 'em," she said. "Just move it."

So I stepped on the gas. I was weaving in and out of traffic now, getting nervous. But whenever I started to slow down she jabbed the gun into my ribs and said, "Keep moving."

She had me make a series of turns, wheels squealing with each one, then we were on a long, open road with hardly any traffic. I was pretty sure the river was ahead of us somewhere.

"Now floor it," she said. I hesitated, and she moved the gun from my ribs to my head. "Floor it, goddamn you!"

I floored it.

Which was how, a few moments later, we were headed straight for barricades and a ruined bridge at eighty-five miles an hour.

I should have hit the brakes. What was she going to do, shoot me? But I kept my foot on the gas, the steering wheel straight.

The woman punched a few more buttons. Green lights flashed, bright patterned circles. Just before we reached the barricades, she jammed a switch on the front of the console.

Everything lurched sideways. At least, that's how it felt, lurched so hard I felt sick. But we were still on the road, still moving straight ahead at eighty-five. Except now the barricades were gone, and stretching out ahead of us, spanning the river and glistening with bright lights, was a whole, undamaged bridge.

We shot across it over the river, came down on the other side, and kept going. I braked through a long, sweeping turn, barely keeping the car on the road, then we were driving along the river road.

I couldn't see much in the dark. It wasn't a part of the city I knew well, but I had been through it a few times, and something seemed out of place.

"Just keep going," the woman said. She was watching a display on the console, a rolling series of figures that made me think of a time counter. I drove along the river road, trying to figure out what seemed different, but unable to pinpoint anything. About fifteen minutes after we'd crossed the bridge, the console display stopped changing, and flashed a single figure.

"All right," the woman said. "Bring the speed back up."

The gun was gone from my head, but I wasn't about to argue. I accelerated until we were back up near eighty. The woman punched buttons, then again jammed the big switch on the front of the console.

We lurched sideways without moving again, and this time I thought I was really going to be sick. Everything in my vision began to tilt, and I had a hell of a time keeping the car on the road. I hit the brakes and brought the car to a stop, no longer caring what she would do to me.

I left the engine running, put my head on the steering wheel, and breathed slowly, deeply, until the spinning stopped. I straightened and looked at the woman. She now held the gun in her lap.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "Terrific."

"We won't have to go so hard now," she said. "Just coast along at twenty, twenty-five miles an hour."

"Does that mean I start driving again?"

She nodded.

I looked down at the gun in her lap, and nodded back. "Give me another minute or two, will you?" I held up my hand, which was shaking. "I can't drive like this."

"All right."

I sat there, trying to relax, trying to cut down the shakes. The street was nearly deserted; only a few cars drove by, and there were no pedestrians. The cars looked odd, but there wasn't enough light for me to

figure out why. Then I leaned forward over the steering wheel and looked at the front end of the Mazda. It was still an ugly brown, but the nose had become more elongated, sharper. The retractable headlights were gone, replaced by conventional stationary lights.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked.

"If it was daylight, you'd see even stranger things," she said.

Which made me look more closely at our surroundings. The nearby streetlight was mounted on an unusually thick metal pole, and gave off a sharp, emerald glow I'd never seen before. The lights in the buildings were brighter, harsher than I would have expected.

"Let's go," the woman said.

I breathed deeply a few more times. Then I put the car into gear, let out the clutch, and swung back onto the road.

We drove slowly, and I kept searching for changes in my surroundings, but it was too dark to see much. The woman directed me through several turns, then onto a freeway.

On the freeway there were differences I could identify. The overhead signs were blue rather than green, lit from below by rose-tinted lights. And the street and city names were completely unfamiliar--definitely not English. I didn't think I could pronounce half of them.

"You going to tell me what the hell is happening here?"

"Just look for a motel," she said.

"And how am I supposed to recognize one?"

She smiled. "Spelled just the same here as where you're from. It's practically a trans-universal word."

We drove on, and I wanted something to break the silence, to ground me.

"Will that thing play music?"

The woman just laughed and shook her head, and I wondered what was so funny.

She was right, though, about a motel. From a mile away I saw a bright glowing sign:

M O T E L

As we got closer, I could make out other words, but none of them made sense. There were numbers as well, but there were too many digits, and a strange hooked symbol instead of a dollar sign.

"Hope you can pay for this," I said. "My money's not going to be much good here."

She smiled. "You'd be surprised."

I pulled off the freeway, drove into the motel parking lot, and the woman pointed out the office at the end of the building. She made me go in with her. At the desk, she talked to a crusty old man who wore a black helmet, face covered by a smoky visor. What they spoke sounded like a mix of foreign languages--a few words close to English, others like German, a few like French.

The woman paid with large, brightly colored bills, and the man gave her a narrow cylinder that hung by a chain from a plastic ball. We walked back to the car in silence, then she directed me to drive around the back of the building, where we parked in front of a tan door. The woman handed the wine bottles to me, took two duffel bags out from behind the seats, then made sure I locked the car. She inserted the cylinder into a narrow opening where it hummed, then clicked; the door swung open, and we stepped inside.

There was a table with two padded chairs, a television set, a radio, and a double bed. The woman set the duffel bags on the floor, and I put the wine bottles on the table; the labels had changed, and were now unreadable. I looked at her.

"There's only one bed."

"We'll manage," she said. "Let's go get something to eat, I'm hungry."

We went to a coffee shop next to the motel, where the woman ordered for both of us. I ended up with something that looked and tasted a lot like a Denny's chicken fried steak and mashed potatoes.

After we ate, the woman said she needed a drink. I figured I could use one too, so we went to the attached lounge and sat at a table in the back corner, empty tables all around us. She asked me what I liked to drink, and I told her Scotch. She ordered from the waiter, and when my drink came it did taste an awful lot like Scotch--cheap Scotch, but Scotch nevertheless. The woman was drinking something clear over ice.

"A trans-universal," the woman said. "Alcohol, coffee, and tobacco. Hotels and motels are close, along with guns and cars, but alcohol, coffee, and tobacco are almost everywhere."

Right. We drank. One drink, two drinks. Then a third. I was feeling it. We didn't talk, but we had another drink. I didn't know about her, but I was getting smashed.

"What's your name?" I asked. Drunk, I was feeling reckless, and it seemed like a reckless question.

"It would sound like garbage." She paused. "Call me Victoria." Another pause. "What's your name?"

"Robert."

"Robert." She nodded. "Robert, do you have any idea what's been happening to you?"

I shook my head.

"Of course not. Ever heard of parallel universes?"

"Sure. As an idea, not something that actually exists."

"They exist. We've been moving from one to another." She signaled for two more drinks, then looked at me for a minute before going on. "The console in the car? It generates probability waves that slip us from one universe to another."

The drinks came, and she drank half of hers immediately. It was a crazy idea, but how else had I come to this place? We sat for a while in silence, drinking. Actually, I kind of liked the idea of traveling between universes. It beat hell out of sitting alone in an empty apartment all weekend.

"Wait a second," I said. "How the hell do you know how to speak from one place to another? You can't know all these languages."

She shook her head. "I don't." She tapped at the base of her skull. "But this does. Batch of microchips planted in my head." Then she stretched out her arms. "Robert, I'm wired. I've got a built-in receiver running through my whole body. Every time I shift universes, my body pulls in all the radio and television signals, whatever's out there, and the batch in my head does the rest. In ten or fifteen minutes, I've got enough of the language to get by. That's how I picked up your slang. And each time I shift places, I shift languages. Or I can lock onto one, like I have with yours." She paused. "I like being able to talk to you."

I looked at her for a minute.

"Why? Why are you traveling between universes? And who the hell is after you?"

She didn't answer. She returned my gaze for a while, stood, then said, "Let's get back to the room."

Without thinking, I opened my wallet to leave a tip. My paper money had changed from green to the brightly colored bills I'd seen Victoria use.

"Just like the car," Victoria said. "Anything that's not alive." She took two small bills from my wallet, left them on the table.

I felt a lot drunker as we walked back to the motel. Or maybe it was just overload. I felt I was moving through water. Or mud. It seemed like a long trip across the parking lot, but we finally reached our room and went inside.

I dropped into one of the chairs. Victoria sat on the bed with her back against the wall. Someone in the room above us kept dropping things onto the floor.

"When I first opened the car door and saw you," I said, "it looked like you were trying to decide whether or not to shoot me."

Victoria shook her head slightly and smiled. "I would never have shot you."

"Maybe you shouldn't tell me that. Maybe I'll just take off."

"Yeah? Where the hell are you going to go?"

I shrugged.

"No," she said. "I was trying to decide whether or not to take you with me."

"Why did you? Hostage?"

She shook her head again, the smile gone. "I've been lonely," she said. "I just wanted the company."

I didn't say anything. She pushed up from the bed. "I'm going to take a shower." She turned away from me and walked into the bathroom, closed the door.

Find the gun, I thought. But only for a moment. I didn't really care where the gun was, I didn't want to have anything to do with it. What I did instead was undress and get into bed. I was beat, still half drunk, and I needed the sleep.

But I couldn't sleep. I lay wide awake, waiting for her to return. It had been a long time since I'd been involved with anyone, and that had been a woman who spent all her time on speed of one kind or another; I'd begun to feel like I was moving in slow motion whenever I was with her. Now I felt as if I had been on speed most of the evening. I closed my eyes, but that didn't help. I waited.

I opened my eyes to the covers being pulled away, and Victoria standing over me, naked and wet from the shower. She was a completely normal woman, whatever universe she'd come from.

She crawled across the bed on all fours, dripping onto my skin as she leaned over me. She blew air across my belly, through the hair between my legs. She moved down toward my thighs, and straddled me.

"I'm too drunk," I said.

She looked down at my crotch. "No you're not," she said.

"I'm too tired."

"No you're not."

"I don't even know what you are," I said.

"What do you think I am?" She moved forward, lifted slightly, then lowered herself onto me, warm and moist. She smiled. "Just drive," she said.

I drove.

She wouldn't talk about where we were going, or why. I had the feeling she didn't have any particular destination in mind, that she was just shifting from one universe to another at random, trying to lose her pursuer. For a few days, it seemed to work.

I got used to the changes. Or rather, to the idea of change. Each day we made at least one shift, usually two. Once we made three, which was a mistake--I got sick all over the front seat and nearly ran the car into a concrete channel on the side of the road used by people on cable-powered skateboards. After that, we shared the driving, and stuck to two shifts a day.

Everything changed--the car, our clothes, money. Language changed, occasionally becoming so close to English that I could understand it again, but usually becoming completely unintelligible. And the world around us changed.

Once we emerged into a domed city, buildings reaching to the dome itself and through it, jutting into the open sky above. Another city was a maze of narrow roadways with hundreds of footbridges above the streets, connecting the stone buildings in a vast, chaotic network of bent and twisted metal. And once we came out onto a cracked and potholed concrete road in the middle of a dry, gutted wasteland, flat ruins for miles in all directions, no signs at all of life. We shifted out of there as soon as we could.

We spent several hours a day on the road. Sometimes we shifted at lower

speeds, which was easier on me, but which, she said, made for smaller jumps that were easier to track. And though she could make a second shift as soon as fifteen or twenty minutes after the first, Victoria liked to put as much actual distance between shifts as possible. Left a tougher trail to follow, she said.

We spent much of the time driving in silence, but we did talk a little. I talked about my own world, my universe, my life--which wasn't much. I was in charge of the Documents Department of a large corporate law firm. I liked the job itself, but working for asshole attorneys all day long had become almost unbearable. And my personal life was hardly fulfilling. But I talked about it all, and once in a while Victoria would talk about what it was like traveling between universes.

"Do you ever stop running?" I asked once. "I mean, how long can you keep it up? Don't you ever get a chance to just stop for a while?"

Victoria nodded. "When I've made enough shifts over a long period of time, it gives me distance. I get a few days, a couple of weeks. I'll just stay in one place for a while, relax, or maybe do something to pick up some money. But eventually I have to leave, start shifting again."

"You can't lose them?"

She shook her head and tapped the console. "These damn things leave a trail in the wake of the probability waves. Make enough shifts and you can make the trail faint, but a good hunter will always be able to pick it up eventually."

Hunter. And I was traveling with the hunted.

Victoria did talk about bringing me back to my own universe. First couple of times she mentioned it I didn't say anything. I was thinking about it. But I liked the idea of staying with her.

"I don't want to go back," I finally said to her.

It was dusk. Victoria was driving through the outskirts of a haze-filled city, blue flashes of light bursting silently and sporadically high above us. The streets were nearly deserted.

"You don't know what the hell you're talking about," she said. "You can't just stick around for a while and then change your mind, get a plane flight home."

"I realize that."

"You realize shit." She turned onto a busier street. Lights were coming on in buildings, and the blue flashes were increasing in frequency. "Just look for a goddamn motel, all right?"

Neither of us said anything for a while. The street seemed to be headed for the city center, and it got busier and more crowded, brighter and louder. A couple of miles along, Victoria pulled into the parking lot of a run-down motel set back in the concrete pilings of an overpass. She drove into a slot, switched off the engine, and turned to me.

"Look," she said. "The farther we get away from your universe, the harder it'll be to get back. We get far enough away, it'll be impossible. You'll be stuck out here somewhere, no way back. And traveling with me isn't the safest thing you can do. I've had people hunting me for two years. Some day they're going to catch up with me. You aren't going to want to be around when they do." She paused. "I've been on my own for years, and that's the way I want it. I like your company, but I'm not about to make this permanent. You're holding me up, for Christ's sake. You can't handle more than two shifts a day. On my own, I can do five or six before it hits me that hard." She paused again. "You understand what I'm saying?"

"I'll get used to it," I said.

"Not soon enough for me."

"I don't want to go back."

"Christ." She turned away from me, opened the door, and went to check in.

Three more days. Traveling, shifting, no resolution, no final decision.

Then, one morning, driving slowly through the heart of a city, we shifted, and dropped into the middle of a war.

We went from bright afternoon sunshine to gray skies darkened by clouds of ash. From laughter and shouts and purring traffic to screams and sirens and gunfire. From busy but orderly streets filled with calm pedestrians and cyclists to chaos, people running from shelter to shelter, and vehicles burning on the roads.

I saw the crater in front of us just in time, swerved, and jolted up a curb, knocking over a metal canister that spilled fuming liquid across the sidewalk. I got the car back on the road, but half a block ahead of us was a barricade manned by armed soldiers. Huge guns were aimed directly at us. I hit the brakes and made a half-accidental U-turn, downshifted and punched the gas. Gunshots exploded, something hit the car, but we were still going.

"Shift us the hell out of here!" I screamed at her.

"I can't, you fucking moron! It's too damn soon!"

I turned down the first side street, nearly losing control of the car, then, seeing more barricades up ahead, swung into an alley that dead-ended in a heap of trash.

Victoria was out of the car before it stopped, shoving aside the trash--blocks of foam rubber, huge wads of paper, and other lightweight bundles. I drove the car into the opening she'd made, half burying the car in the mound. I got out, locked the doors, and helped her finish hiding the car with the foam blocks and wadded paper.

No one seemed to have followed us. I wondered if we should have just stayed in the car, but Victoria was already crawling through a broken window into one of the buildings lining the alley. I followed her inside. The building was dark, and nearly silent; the only sounds came from outside, muffled by the brick walls. There was enough light coming in through the grimy, cracked windows for us to make our way. I followed Victoria through jumbles of complex machinery.

"Where are we going?" I whispered.

"I want to get above ground level. I'll feel safer. Then we can find a window where we can keep an eye on the car."

She found a stairway, and we went up. The doorway to the second floor was scarred and warped, the door blown off its hinges. We went through it, and came out in a maze of clear-walled cubicles filled with cracked glass cylinders.

We made our way through the maze, the floor covered with huge chunks of broken glass and twisted coils of wire. Every step made loud crunching sounds. Eventually we reached a window looking down on the alley, only to see half a dozen people dressed in fatigues and carrying weapons. At first I thought they were searching the alley, but it soon became clear that they were actually making camp for the night. The car looked to be safe, but we had no way to get to it.

The soldiers erected a structure that was half tent, half lean-to against the brick building across the way, and started a fire inside a squat metal cylinder.

We watched the soldiers and the fire for a while, but it was obvious they weren't going to leave, so we set up for the night ourselves. We cleared a space to sleep in, scrounged some scraps of cloth and some torn cushions to make a bed. Then we tried to sleep.

I didn't sleep much. Sporadic gunfire sounded throughout the night, and bursts of bright color regularly lit up the window, reflecting shards of light from the broken glass and the cubicle walls.

I was glad when dawn came. The sky outside was overcast, a gradually brightening gray. I went to the window. Below, the soldiers were breaking camp. One of them extinguished the cylinder fire while the others broke down the lean-to and packed it away.

"It looks like they're leaving," I said.

Victoria joined me at the window. We watched the soldiers pack, and about a half hour later they gathered together, talked for a few minutes, then marched halfheartedly out of the alley. They turned left onto the main

street, and were soon gone from sight.

"Let's wait a while," Victoria said. "Make sure they don't come back for anything."

The soldiers didn't come back, but a few minutes later a woman appeared at the mouth of the alley. She was quite tall, with long, light hair tied into a double tail, and wearing a dark green, form-fitting coverall. She hesitated, looking down the alley, glancing in all directions.

"Jesus H. Christ," Victoria said, her voice hardly more than a whisper. I realized then that this had to be her pursuer.

The woman started into the alley, walking slowly, looking up and down the walls of the buildings.

"What happens if she finds the car?"

"She'll find it," Victoria said.

The woman was two-thirds of the way down the alley, almost directly beneath us, when a shout brought her to a halt. She turned. At the mouth of the alley was a group of soldiers; maybe the same group that had camped overnight.

One of the soldiers called out something, and the woman responded. I couldn't make out what they were saying, it wasn't loud enough, but I wouldn't have understood a word anyway. Victoria just shrugged when I asked her.

The woman took a few steps toward the soldiers, then stopped. The soldiers came into the alley, marched down it, and surrounded her. She gestured at the street, then at one of the buildings. I could see her smiling. One of the soldiers jabbed at her shoulder. The woman kept smiling. Another soldier shrugged, pointed up at the sky.

Suddenly one of the soldiers raised a handgun, put it against the woman's temple, and fired.

The woman's head jerked--I jerked--and she crumpled to the ground, blood running onto the gravel and pavement. Victoria made a sharp, quiet sound and gripped my arm. My own hands gripped the windowsill, nails digging into wood.

The soldiers didn't touch the woman. They looked down at her, but they didn't search her, didn't move her, nothing. They stood around for a few minutes, smoking cigarettes, then walked out of the alley.

Victoria and I stood at the window in silence, looking down at the woman's body, the dark spreading pool of blood.

"Did you want her dead?" I finally asked. Hoping the answer would be no. Victoria shook her head.

"Would you have killed her if she'd caught up to you?"

She hesitated, then shrugged. She was pale, the first time I'd ever seen her when she didn't seem completely self-assured. I didn't feel too good myself.

"That's it," she said eventually. "You're going back."

I didn't say a word. I still didn't plan to go back, but I didn't think it was the time to argue.

We waited a long time. Two hours, maybe three. The soldiers never returned. The dead woman lay undisturbed, her feet in the shafts of sunlight that broke through the clouds and the jagged building roofs. Eventually we went downstairs and crawled back out through the broken window. We crossed the alley to the dead woman. Victoria knelt beside her, went through the coverall pockets and removed a block of keys and a wad of money. She murmured a few words in a language I'd never heard, touched the woman on her chest, shoulders, and throat, then gently closed the woman's eyes. She stood.

"Let's go," she said. "You drive."

We dug out the car, got in. I started the engine and backed slowly down the alley while Victoria played around with the console.

"That way." She pointed down the street as we emerged from the alley. "Go slow."

The street was a mess, but now there were people out on the sidewalks who didn't look like soldiers, and a few other vehicles drove slowly in either direction. We'd gone a couple of blocks when Victoria pointed to a driveway leading through a hedge. I pulled into the driveway, drove through the opening in the hedge, and stopped just behind another car.

"Get this thing turned around so we can pull out in a hurry if we have to."

I did, and left the engine idling.

"Wait here." Victoria got out, walked up to the other car, produced the block of keys she'd taken from the dead woman, and opened the front door. She ducked inside, seemed to do something at the dashboard--another console, I figured.

While she was in the other car, I dug through her bags until I found the gun. I checked to make sure I could work the damn thing, then tucked it between my seat and door.

Victoria left the other car, walked back, and got in beside me. She didn't say anything at first. Instead, she did things with the Mazda's console, working intently for several minutes. Finally she finished and turned to me.

"You're going back," she said. "I am not going to be responsible for you being killed."

"No--" I started, but she cut me off, sharp and quick.

"No, nothing," she said. "This isn't the end of it. There'll be someone else after me before long." She paused. "You're going back. I've programmed this thing to make all the shifts, reverse the route we took here."

"It'll take me back?" I asked. "To my universe?"

"Close enough so you won't know the difference. Two shifts a day until you're home." She gave me a wad of money. "This should be plenty to get you back. Pretend to be deaf and dumb and illiterate, for Christ's sake, and you'll probably be fine."

"What about you?"

"I'll be taking that," she said, pointing to the car in front of us. "The console in it looks to be working just fine." She turned back to me. "You pull out, and get up to speed as fast as you can. It'll make the first shift as soon as you hit thirty."

"I'd just as soon stay with you," I said.

She got out of the car without answering, shut the door, and came around to the driver's side. I rolled down the window.

"I mean it," I said.

She sighed. "You want me to threaten you with the gun again?"

I gave her a half smile. She leaned through the window and kissed me. Then she pulled back, stepped away from the car. "Go," she said.

I nodded. I put the car in reverse and backed up a few feet. Victoria walked over to the other car, and I stopped. I took the gun, picked what looked to be the most vulnerable spot of the console, and jammed the gun barrel against it. I closed my eyes and pulled the trigger.

I got off six or seven shots, metal flying everywhere, before Victoria grabbed my arm. She screamed something at me that sounded a lot like, "Asshole!"

I opened my eyes. The console was a mess. I looked at Victoria, who stared at me through the open window. I held out the gun, and she took it.

"You're fucking crazy," she said.

I got out of the car, stood beside her. "Want me to drive?"

She didn't answer. We walked to the other car, and I got in behind the wheel, Victoria beside me. I started the engine, put it in gear, and backed around the Mazda. I shifted gears, moved through the hedge, then stopped at the edge of the street. I looked at Victoria, who was shaking her head, but smiling now.

"Do I have to say it?" she asked.

I shook my head. I let out the clutch, swung the car out onto the street,

and drove.

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