
Susan Kerslake

CHOICES

A beautiful summer morning. A perfect day for a drive. Two lovers embark on a journey that will change their lives forever . . .

Peggy had only had a little while to make up her mind. Standing at the window, pushing her hair out of her eyes, she watched taxicabs cruise the streets. It was midnight. From time to time, she swivelled the knob on the radio, found a weather report. Well, rain in the country was better than rain in the city; it would mean a different type of weekend: cozy, fires, snacks, catching up on reading. Not what she had in mind. With variations, she could do the same thing in her small apartment. Time in the sun, gardening, croquet, a swim were more like it. The weatherman hemmed and hawed. Cloud, fog, onshore winds, offshore winds. The front should move in by noon tomorrow bringing overcast skies and rainy weather for the weekend. A factor.

Cabs honked to each other at corners and followed fire engines and ambulances. Bicycles rode by making that special titter and thrill of gears. What she wanted to hear was a nighthawk blitzing the narrow passageway between buildings. She turned the radio down and slept under the country and western songs.

The phone rang at six o'clock, then again at six-twenty, but she had stayed awake, taking a last shower, packing, boiling water for a starter cup of coffee. Then she went downstairs and sat on the step catching the sun coming over the building across the street. Despite not enough sleep she was wide-awake, but she knew in a couple of hours that missed sleep would come irresistibly, anesthetically. Stillness wrapped the morning.

She thought about lying on the pier, adjusting her body, her back, just so to fit the cracks in the wood, settling her bones so her

weight was mostly on the muscle of her thighs and back. The hot sun having found her, stretched itself over her skin, then lay down on it, lapping, seeping through, sinking beneath. A web of heat. It took the edge off the light slap of water bumping into the piles.

Being able to close the door behind her, leaving laundry, a couple of dishes, unanswered letters, unpaid bills, phone calls to be returned and library books gave her a perversely good feeling. Surrendering to the uncommunicative wilderness, a place without. Should she die tomorrow, someone else could deal with the dirty sink.

A little after seven, Ken drove up. The passenger seat was empty, but that was all. Hampers, suitcases, buckets, baskets, bags full of essentials were stuffed into every available space in the small hatchback.

Ken got out for a moment and put the hood up. Peggy looked in with him at the still grey motor, supposing that if she could see it while the car was running she would see parts moving. As it was, it seemed an unlikely contraption: a tangle of shapes, a thick, stale smell. Some parts were clean and shiny. Most were caked with oil and dirt. She tried to see some quality, some mystique that would account for the cultish zeal of people and their cars. This little car was blue. It had been decorated with strips of chrome, grill, rubber pads to cushion bumps. The inside was black and blue, a compact arrangement of storage spaces, air vents, windows, handles, visors, a radio, knobs and numbers. On the street at fifteen miles an hour she felt safe.

There were some minor rearrangements to be made before her bundle fit so it wouldn't bounce around in case of sudden moves. She asked him to stop at a liquor store when they opened so she could pick something up for the weekend. He said, "I'm glad you decided to come."

Ken came close to her for the first time last summer. She hadn't really considered it even though he was attractive in conventional ways: tall enough for her, curly hair, a brown mist and damp, unsqueezed quality when he came out of the water, lifting himself in one swift motion, water drops shimmering on the springy ends of his hair. He had small, courageous scars on his body; she wondered why some people showed scars and others not at all. Her own legs and arms, which must have suffered the assortment of scrapes and

scratches of every normal childhood, were essentially smooth, unblemished surfaces.

On casual dates during the long winter, they used to sit and discuss the peculiar relationship built out of sand and water and sun. It surprised them both that it had endured in any form past summer. Perhaps the distance, the odd formality that allowed them to say anything in speculation, was a factor. Each lapsed into intense relationships with others. Then they met like cousins, burning up late hours with wonder and woe. Between adventures they stroked each other on the back and other places.

At a million dollars, or some such figure, a mile, they took the main highway out of the city. About ten miles out, there was an intricate intersection with overpasses and large green signs of instructions. On each side, rock, grass, and scrub spruce. There was a little more traffic, others who'd gotten off to an early start: station wagons with loads of kids, cars with U-hauls, tenting equipment, vans, and the relatively light pack of picnickers. Several campsites off the main highway hooked into some scenic view.

It was hot. Singularly bored, Peggy was torn between trying to make conversation and catching a catnap under the blanket of sun coming in the window. Leaning her face on the back of the seat, readjusting the seat belt slightly, she watched Ken through drowsy eyes. He seemed attached to the car at the small of his back. She supposed it was the pressure on the gas pedal. She stared at his lap, his legs loosely apart, one knee resting on the door, the other brushing the gear shift. One hand gripped the top of the wheel, the other, upside down letting the wheel slide back and forth through his fingers, was softly curved. He should be a doctor sitting behind a big desk, his hands nestled in each other on the bare surface in front of him.

He lifted each hand separately to push up the sleeves of his T-shirt. There were wet patches on it. At that moment his body tensed. She saw it quite clearly, his entire body arched backwards and forwards at the same time. What was happening, had he seen something, was he having a fit or a stroke? She started to move. . . .

. . . Voices. Slanted through the heat. No one she knew. Not Ken, no name, but nice, human, troubled, urgent, persistently calling to her. Demanding that she answer as if she were oversleeping or had

been naughty. "Hey, hey you, can you hear me? Wake up. . . ." As if in a dream, talking back to them with a dream voice, wondering why they kept on. Such a deep sleep, why wouldn't they let her finish it, just a few more minutes? It was dark, the middle of the night, why get up in the middle of the night? What was wrong? Who was making this kind of mistake?

Someone touched her. She couldn't be sure where. She used all her concentration but still couldn't be sure where. . . . A light but irritating touch like an insect crawling. Then there was more. Real pain and pressure climbing on top of the dream, coming too fast; she wanted to wake up and get away from it. Struggling, she groped around the pile of sleep in the tunnel of her consciousness.

A smell of scorched hair. And metal. Oil, rubber. She was too close to some machine. It must be dangerous. How had she gotten there? Those people must still be there, why didn't they get her away from the danger? She tried to call them, her mind brought up all the right words, anyone would have understood, but they blocked up in her mouth behind her lips which were soldered shut. Pain radiated from her mouth; she wanted to touch it, cover it, protect it. Where were her hands? Concentrating, she followed a path from the point of pain across her shoulder and down. Her arms seemed to be folded and pressed close to her body but she couldn't reach them. But there was more to her. Why couldn't she feel anymore?

Light pressed on her eyelids. It wasn't night; it was morning or afternoon. She thought that if she opened her eyes she would see. No one would have to tell her anything; she would know it all. There was a strong smell of fumes. Bringing her attention back to what she could hear, she hoped to find Ken's voice. That was who it was. Where were they that she and Ken were together like this? The voices were there again but they weren't trying to wake her up. The voices were tripping over each other. She heard "reach" and "rescue." She must open her eyes. What were they talking about? Who else was there?

Suddenly her back burned, each vertebra incinerated in turn. Then it stopped. She could not move. Out of the fragments of pain came the beginnings of fear; her mind formed the word "help." She overheard herself.

The light outside her eyelids was growing stronger. It would

soon want to invade. She was almost awake. Now it did not seem desirable. Opening her eyes would be the last bridge. With the light of day she would have to admit this and allow the chaos to gel around her. Ready. She tried to open her eyes. They were stuck. For a moment she feared they were burned shut, but it must be blood. Of course, blood. She wondered how much blood. With effort she got her eyelids apart enough; the dried blood crumbled off, specks fell into her eyes scratching them. For a moment she was unable to focus on anything. Then she saw, right in front of her, grey surfaces; it was impossible to tell exactly what they were. Up and down and to each side, the same tangle presented itself.

Between the grey there was light. Not much. Everything was too thick and close. Desperately she wanted a deep breath, but her body was too squeezed.

"Get me out of here." Her mind said it over and over. She put words on the tips of her fingers and played them. Each breath, each heartbeat echoed through the empty pipe that rested on her ear. She had to say it, shout it out, let them know, "I'm here. I'm here. I hurt. Find me. Hear me. See me." Working the words magically in her brain.

Whimpering leaked from her brain into her mouth. Noise was possible with her mouth closed. This discovery gave her hope. She could let them know. Taking a breath, she groaned. And waited. Weren't they listening? Were they talking to each other? Had they gone away? She did it again: a higher pitch. Waited. Maybe she was imagining it? She opened her eyes again. The grey was so close. She couldn't tell where she was or how this had happened. The air was stale and hot.

What if there wasn't enough to breathe? What if there was fire? What if her nose got burned and she couldn't open her mouth to breathe? If they never heard her. Never saw her?

She tried to move again. There were things that pressed on her, a cage of hot metal, wires and pipes. They touched her forehead, bones, skin, hair. And with a knowing that did not come from her senses, she knew that her legs were bent and held. She closed her eyes.

Pain rose and fell in tides. Around it her body began to react. In spastic waves, she shivered, bumping into the bars of her cage. Then she began to sweat through cold flesh. She tried to co-

operate. Counting through the waves of pain, coloring the chills, imagining the goose bumps exploding, erupting with color, geysers of fluorescent sparkling pink and green. Sweat did not tickle, her skin must be too tense with pain. She followed the pain, staying just shy of it, observing, watching, trying to sandbag barriers around it. It went underground, under the shallows and resurfaced.

She must stay in control. She must get on top of it. Close attention to minute adjustments, uprisings, migrations. She tried to analyse the type of pain, burning, sharp, dull, a pressure. Was there a centre to it? How far out did it radiate? How long did it last? It took so much energy; she wasn't sure she could keep it up. So much concentration. To surrender could be imagined; giving in to the flood of pain, drowning in it, brain-breaking pain.

"I think I heard something."

Strangers were out there, still out there, they hadn't gone away. She made more sounds full of the pain.

"Can you talk?"

"Are you awake?"

"Don't move."

"There's been an accident."

Thank god, giving her information, something to keep her sane.

"You're wedged in the car. The engine has come up into the front of the car. We're trying to figure out how to get you out."

She heard creaking, the jiggling of metal. They were starting to touch the car. "Don't!" she groaned. Something might move or fall, set off sparks or explosions. "Don't." Nausea roiled up in her throat. They must be careful of her. They couldn't make a mistake. What did they know about the situation? What could they see? She heard more voices; one was louder, giving orders.

"Move on, there's nothing to see here, folks, just keep moving..." It sounded like a TV program; the boss was there. A picture flashed in her mind of the highway, placid, empty, solid cement squirted out of a tube, lying between the gravel and grass, the sky lapping, dipping a blue tongue.

Too much was going on; she was too tired for all this information. Only one thing mattered: pain. If they could get her out and straighten her out the pain would stop; it would just run out the bottoms of her feet, the top of her head. Stream out her fingers. She was too full. There was no more room.

Why didn't they just do it? Stop talking at her, explaining what *wasn't* happening. Just do it, don't talk. It shouldn't be up to her to have to figure this out, to argue and make the plans. She had too much to do with her own body. She felt sorry for it, poor, helpless, trapped thing. Punished.

Something was dripping on the side of her face, scalding her ear and neck. She was going to have to let go. For a while she had been able to browse and form a knowledge of this territory. She could not tolerate change. The stuff dripped more slowly. If it would only stop in time; before she lost control.

When she woke and smelt the air, there was a definite change: an antiseptic odor. "Am I already saved?" she thought. Was it true? A hive of voices answered her thoughts.

"Thank god she's alive!"

What did that mean? Of course she was alive. There was even a moment when she was free of the pain.

"Look, we've got to see if that engine is loose, if it can be lifted."

The voices were tense. She found herself listening analytically, thinking about the plan. Would it work? Things were happening very fast; there was a lot of motion just outside; it made the air move. She felt calm and trusting. Even if they killed her she wouldn't blame them. Accidents piled on accidents. Skinned knees, stubbed toes, cuts. Each time she delivered herself to someone to fix it, to make things right. Each time they had.

Once started, it went very quickly; the motor began to move. In several places the pipes were bonded to her skin. When it pulled up it tore off the flesh. Sections came apart, spilling more gas and oil on her. Pain blossomed when pressure was released and blood flowed through pinched veins. At one point she slumped helplessly to the side.

Then, for the first time, she felt human hands; someone was there to catch her. Her head fell into a bowl of hands. Many hands reached her. She thought they were making that terrible grinding noise, but then she saw the motor being lifted away. They had to hold her until a board could be slipped under to slide her out.

When the men saw her move on her own, they put her on a stretcher. The sun struck her face. An enormous space dotted with faces opened above her head, but she didn't mind. Balloons. A

party. She tried to smile for all the lovely faces around her.

Close to her ear, paper wrappers were being torn. Materials were laid on her as if she were a table. They began to cut away her clothes with scissors, lifting the cloth, pulling it away from her skin. She watched the faces, the cringe of lips, narrowing of eyes. When they walked around, their shoes crunched the gravel.

"I'm going to start an IV."

"I'm going to wash your mouth."

"I'm going to give you some oxygen, you're gulping air." The mask was clear plastic. She didn't want it on her face; she didn't want anything touching her face.

The sun was right overhead, shining, hot, pushing her eyelids down, settling into the hollows on each side of her collarbones. There were no images on the insides of her eyelids; just colors, nothing frightening. But she was frightened. Where was Ken? He should be there somewhere. These were nice people but they were strangers.

Then in the ambulance, he was suddenly there, sitting across from her feet. She could see him. How peculiar to see him scrunched among the medical supplies, tubes, packets. He was far away, blurred. She could smell urine. She thought about when she used to be able to move her arms. One was strapped down with the IV, but that was just-for now. Even the light in the ambulance hurt her eyes; the pupils wouldn't contract. She didn't want to have to close her eyes again. Ever again.

Something made a lot of noise. The sound was in her head, the crash and thud of metal and rubber. Now she knew just what it was. Ken was bent between his arms and legs; she knew he didn't hear it.

Calmly, she noticed that he was bald—no, what was that? A bandage on his head. He'd hit his head. Was that all? A bump on the head. She looked around; did they know that? A bump on the head! The attendant was gazing out the frosted window. Periodically he glanced at the intersection in the IV.

Flat on her back it was hard to breathe; her lungs were sliding up into her throat. Reaching across her body to adjust the oxygen, the attendant jolted her legs. She saw it. No doubt, no confusion. But she didn't feel him. Not a touch, a bump, nothing. The breath jumped in her throat.

Up in the corner was a round metal surface; something was showing; an image was captured inside. She tried to catch Ken's eye, to get him to look, but he wouldn't. His lips were wrinkled as if he'd seen something distasteful. She looked at the mirror-like thing again. It drew her eyes.

"Ken, Ken!" but it was a mumble and when she found him he was putting his hands on each side of his head, leaning forward. He looked like he was thinking. What was it? Didn't he have anything more to say? About staying with her, about his responsibilities? A hollow place began to open in her chest; cold sank in. He could get up and walk away. What if he did? He was the one who'd been through this with her. Whose idea had it been anyway? Who called whom? Out of the space in her chest came the feeling that it wouldn't be enough, that she would be disappointed. The fact that there had been a choice, that this was the matter of a choice, struck her. If she'd had to go, a line of duty, emergency. . . . But this. For no reason.

Responding

1. What do you think caused the accident? What details from the story support your interpretation?
2. What is Peggy's sense of her relationship with Ken before the accident? Does her sense of the relationship change after the accident? Comment.
3. Does Ken show Peggy that he feels any sense of responsibility to her after the accident? Do *you* think he has any obligation to her? Discuss.
4. (a) In your own words explain the meaning of the last five sentences (beginning "Out of the space . . .") Does this story have a good ending? Explain your response.
(b) What reasons might the author, Susan Kerslake, give for using this ending?
5. What do you think was Susan Kerslake's purpose for writing this story? What is she saying about the nature of some people's relationships?

Choices

6. Tell or write about a time when you were disappointed or betrayed by someone you were close to.
7. Paraplegics and quadriplegics have been known to struggle against incredible odds to gain a place in society. Find information and report (orally or in writing) about the consequences of accidents that people such as Rick Hansen and Jocelyn Lovell have experienced.

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