

My father says that we save lives

Do Van Ranst

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Translator Nancy Forrest-Flier

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One

Our house is built at a bend in the road that no one ever expects. You drive countless miles down a monotonous route that's as straight as an arrow, past withered trees and cactuses. Then the road climbs up slowly to a point where you can see the scaffolding of a bridge in the distance. At that point you start fixing your eyes on the bridge, which is right in front of you, because it's a welcome diversion after hours of gazing at nothing but the sun in a cloudless sky. You think that in order to get to the bridge you have to drive straight ahead, so that's where you focus your eyes: straight ahead. But suddenly the road makes a wicked turn almost ninety degrees to the left. And right in that wicked turn is our house.

All seven drivers have missed the turn and ended up in our house, car and all. They all had to spend a few days lying on our couch where they were nursed by my mother or my grandma. A few of the men send us letters every now and then. This makes my mother deliriously happy.

The first unfortunate soul to crash into our house was my father, about seventeen years ago. The house was still the home of my mother's parents.

Two years later I was born.

Two

The bridge is only half a bridge.

They started to build it eighteen years ago. But the people living on the banks of the river got into a fight about who was going to pay for the bridge, a problem that had never been properly settled. The people on the left bank thought the people on the right bank should pay for most of it because they'd benefit most from having a bridge. The people on the right bank thought exactly the same thing about the people on the other side. They couldn't come to an agreement and finally the work stopped. A whole half a bridge was built for nothing.

To this very day the people on this side refuse to pay for that half-finished construction. A bridge that's only half a bridge is useless. You don't pay for something like that.

It's been years since anyone bothered with this place. The town council hasn't sent any public gardeners or planners for a long time. Police patrol cars don't come within a mile of our house. It's a kind of protest. The area around the half bridge just stands there looking pathetic. The weeds are waist-high in some places. The scaffolding of the half bridge is covered with moss and the railing is rusted through

Long ago, before anybody even thought about a bridge, it looked very different. Long ago, when my grandpa was still alive and my grandma could still talk.

Three

My father says we're saving lives. He says if we didn't live here, lots of people would have driven onto the bridge without knowing it was only half a bridge because there's no sign saying that the road stops a mile further on. They and their car would go crashing into the water and drown.

I know what my father means. Now they run into our house first and they're just wounded, but they're not dead.

The last time was about four years ago. I was staying with my Aunt Vicky for a week, so I missed the whole thing and afterwards I was really pissed off. I almost never go out of the house, and the one week I did something happened. That's the way it always is.

Two years before that I wasn't there, either. Then I was in the hospital because my appendix had to come out. I had a bad reaction to the medicine and had to stay four days longer than expected.

According to my mother that accident was the worst of them all. The window and most of the front of the house bit the dust. The whole thing had to be strutted because the upper floor was in danger of falling down. They had to use a blow torch to pull the driver from the wreckage. Total chaos. But I got it all second-hand. I could have just cried when my mother came to tell me the story in the hospital. "Be happy you weren't there," she had said. "It's a miracle nobody died!"

Since then we don't use the first ten feet of our house on the street side any more because we know how dangerous it is there. There's not a stick of furniture in that space and no one gets it into his head to stand or sit there.

We call that part of the house the high-risk zone. My grandpa thought that up when he was still alive. The day after the front of our house had been bashed in for the fifth time he took exact measurements of how far the car had come. To this he added a good foot, which he called the safety margin.

"If the car went any faster it would run deeper into the house, guaranteed," he said, when my mother said she thought it was more than enough without the extra foot.

I think it's funny. A high-risk zone with a safety margin.

The high-risk zone does reduce our living area. The big couch and the arm chair are almost touching the dinner table, and there's just enough room between the dinner table and the cabinet to open the cabinet doors. When we're all at home ☒ my father and mother, my grandma and me ☒ we're practically on top of each other. I hate that.

When I was little I sometimes played with my dolls in the high-risk zone under the window without knowing it. When my mother realized where I was she'd come tearing out of the

kitchen, pick me up in one fell swoop, dolls and all, and put me down in a safe place. As if some whopper of a truck was going to ram into our house one second later.

I understand her rescue attempts, of course. The very first time, when my father rammed into the house, my grandma was asleep at the window. The nose of the car came to a stop at the back of the couch, just where grandma was sitting. Since then my grandma has been sitting in a wheelchair and she trembles all the time.

My father lay on the couch here for two weeks.

I think that afterwards he felt so guilty about the accident and my grandma that he decided to stay and marry my mother. They may also have really in love with each other already. There's not much evidence of that anymore, though.

Four

Sometimes I imagine a car ramming the front of our house and that the driver is a seventeen-year-old boy. Eighteen or nineteen would be fine, too, since I'm fifteen myself.

Then I imagine him bleeding profusely from the forehead, just above his eyebrow. My father has dragged him from the car and laid him on the couch. I dampen a dishcloth in the kitchen and staunch his wound. The boy regains consciousness and smiles at me. My father has the doctor come because the deep cut in his forehead needs stitches. The boy lies on our couch for weeks in order to recover. The cut just above his eyebrow will probably leave a scar, but that's all right because I tell him I think it's sexy to have a scar like that just above your eyebrow.

The boy's name is Benjamin, Bernie or Brad because I like names that start with a B the most.

Five

Our house is the only house for miles around. It takes an hour to bike to the village. I don't know exactly how long it takes to get to the city, but I think at least half a day.

Sue lives in the village. She's my best friend. She's a lesbian. I'm not, but sometimes I make love with her. By making love I mean kissing and stroking. Sometimes I think Sue goes too far. When she tries to put her hand down my underpants I hold her back. It's all right if she touches my breasts, but Sue says that gets boring, just my breasts and nothing else.

We're sitting side by side on her bed. We've taken off our T-shirts and our bras. We always do that almost as soon as I get into her room. It saves a lot of time, says Sue. Sue is always in a hurry when she makes love. Not like she's got a lot to do all day.

"Maybe you should get a nipple piercing," says Sue.

"Why?"

"Because."

"It's super painful," I say. I put my hand on my left breast, as if someone were standing in front of me with a massive needle, ready to puncture my nipple.

"But it only hurts for a minute," says Sue.

"How do you know?" I ask.

Sue shrugs her shoulders. "I know someone who has one," she says.

"Who's that?"

"Doesn't matter. You don't know her anyway," says Sue. She puts her bra on, as if she were suddenly angry.

"Try me," I say. "Maybe I do know her. Does she live in the village?"

But Sue doesn't answer.

Sometimes I hope Sue will hurry up and meet someone else who's lesbian, too. But sometimes I hope she doesn't because I'm afraid I'll lose her. You know what I mean? And then I think, maybe I shouldn't push her away if she wants to put her hand down my underpants. But what if I like it? That really scares me.

Before I let her do that I want to do something with a boy first. Then I can compare. What if I let Sue have her way and I like it? Then maybe I'll suddenly be a lesbian, too, just because I don't know any better.

"Where can you get a piercing like that?" I ask.

"In town."

"That's a problem," I say. "My father really isn't going to take me to town to have my breast pierced." And I say to myself, All righty. That takes care of that.

"My brother can take us," says Sue.

"Okay," I say. Jake is a jerk. I can't imagine him ever taking us to town.

"Would you really do it?" asks Sue.

"Maybe."

Sue snuggles up really close to me and kisses my neck while she loosens her bra.

"Does it cost a lot?" I ask.

"I'll pay half," she says.

I would be perfect if Sue got to know that girl on the day Benjamin or Brad crashed into our house.

Six

Apparently every time a car missed the turn my grandma had predicted it first.

"I just feel it in my bones," she would say. "Something's going to happen."

My father thinks it's bullshit. He says it's just a coincidence that every time grandma's bones feel like that a car rides in to our house.

My father is more religious than the pope and the archbishop put together, and he says it's all the will of God.

God doesn't exist, says my mother. Sometimes they have big fights about that. She says, if that God of yours does exist he's a mean old son of a bitch because he lets so much trouble happen.

"Trouble! Trouble!" my father roars. He thinks we should be grateful that we're allowed to live in the house that serves God. Then he tells the story all over again about how our house had already saved seven lives. Including his own.

Exactly, says my mother. And then all hell really breaks loose, because then my father wants to know what she means by exactly.

I know all too well what my mother means. The big trouble is that she's married to my father. That's what she means. I can't say she's wrong. My father is no good. Don't ask me why. He's just no good.