

Normal Family by Don Trowden

Excerpt, Christmas 1968

“All right. But you owe me,” I dutifully headed off with my mother for Woolworth’s Department store in downtown Providence. Driving with my mother was the most anxiety-producing activity I knew. The first thing she did was light a cigarette. Then she spent five minutes adjusting and re-adjusting the rear-view mirror as if this somehow was going to magically save us enroute. Once she finally put the car into gear and began driving, she nervously clicked her fingernails on the metal frame of the horn, which she was always ready and eager to use. Plumes of cigarette smoke billowed from her nostrils and we drove with the windows partially open despite the cold temperature outside. Fortunately, Woolworth’s was only ten minutes from our house.

My mother was an unusually bright woman. As so often seems to be the case with intelligent people, she was significantly impaired when it came to handling simple spatial tasks such as navigating a car.

“Mom, turn left onto Angell Street!” I called out too late.

“I’m sorry, dear. I’m still getting accustomed to this early darkness. You know I hate driving in the dark,” she pulled into a driveway and knocked over a garbage can as she backed out.

“Be careful,” I ducked, hoping no one was watching.

“It’s just a trash can, don’t worry,” my mother turned onto Angell Street. “Thanks for coming with me honey. I’m glad to have an excuse to get out of the house.”

“It’s okay, Mom. Just pay attention to the road. We need to take this next left at the Stop sign.”

“What, you don’t think I’m capable of managing this simple drive?” she took the turn too quickly, tires squealing around the corner.

There was no good answer to this question. I grinded my teeth and held onto the door latch in case I needed to make an emergency exit.

“I’m preparing your favorite mashed potatoes with gravy for Christmas dinner tomorrow,” she fidgeted with the rear-view mirror. “I think I’ll also make popovers.”

“That sounds great,” I relaxed slightly. “But can I please sit next to you? What with Albert not letting me breathe near his food and Lucy constantly bullying me, I’d rather not sit near them.”

“That’s fine,” she slowed down as we approached a green light. She was not brave enough to risk making the light so admitted defeat at the start, slowing down and holding up traffic.

“Mom, don’t stop. The light’s green...go for it!” I realized I was yelling.

“It’s about to change to yellow, don’t worry,” my mother was content to block the cars behind us. Albert had drolly remarked our mother was someone who preferred to burn her bridges *before* she got on them. I didn’t know it at the time but my mother, brother and grandfather were similar in one significant way—each had little use for other people. Each had an investigative mind, the scientist’s mind. Input from others was always wrong; no one could possibly do anything as well as they could. Some people, including my father and grandmother, seemed to live in large part to please others. Ironically, the last thing the people they gravitated toward wanted was someone helping them. The fact that my mother was now holding up a long line of honking cars caused her no concern at all.

“C’mon, Mom, now the light is red. Why do you always do that?” I slumped further into my seat.

“These other fools can wait,” she exhaled smoke into my face and I rolled the window all the way down.

“Okay, it’s green. Go!”

“There’s no need to be fresh,” she pulled away slowly as several cars raced past with angry men gesticulating in our direction. My mother drove down the hill toward the central driving strip leading into downtown Providence, all the time her nails tap, tap, tapping the steering wheel, cigarette smoke spewing from the corner of her mouth.

“Mom, is there anything I can do to help you feel better? I hope you’ll be able to enjoy Christmas.”

“That’s sweet of you, Henry. You know I’ve been seeing a therapist, right? Do you know what a therapist does?”

“Not really. Is it someone who helps you feel happy?”

My mother smiled. “I suppose that’s as good an explanation as any, although I think many people would beg to differ. Therapists help patients understand patterns in their behavior, some good and some not so good. Once you have a better sense of who you are and how you respond to certain people and events, you can get better.”

“Are you going to be okay, Mom?”

“Don’t worry, sweetie. All this holiday socializing is wearing on my nerves. Let’s just get through the holiday season.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help,” I offered.

“Thanks, dear. I just need to figure out what’s wrong and then everything will be fine.”

We stared silently ahead through the smoke-filled Plymouth station wagon when I realized too late that my mother was driving straight toward a row of lane divider cones. These cones

were arranged in the pattern of flying geese, with one cone at the front, then a row of two, then another row of three and so on all the way back for nearly a hundred feet. The bright orange cones cordoned off a section of road being repaved. I'm not sure exactly what happened, but I think my mother just snapped. Instead of staying left with the other cars, she drove straight into the cones as though pulled by some mystical force. She plowed into the center formation, mowing the cones down in rapid succession.

"Mom, put on the brakes!" I panicked.

No response. She accelerated through the cones in a trance.

Out the window I saw the faces of last-minute shoppers observing us with a mixture of amusement and concern. Mom had knocked down most of the cones when we heard police sirens screaming up from behind. She snapped back to reality and guided the car off to the side of the road, gazing at me through vacant eyes. "Look, I don't know what I just did, but when the officer comes up to the car start crying and maybe he'll let us go."

It wasn't difficult to produce fake tears. When the officer leaned his head in my mother's side window I was already trembling with fear. The officer had an exasperated look on his face as if to say *Whoa, who let this little lady get behind the wheel?* He wore a black uniform with an imposing pistol shoved into his holster. I could see from his badge that his last name was Camacho.

"Everyone okay in here?" the officer peered through the window to make sure no one was hurt.

"Oh, please officer, don't put my mommy in jail," I adopted my best theatrical tone. "She's not a good driver and got confused on which way to go."

“So instead of going left around the cones with all the other cars she decided to run straight through them?” the officer stared at me in disbelief.

“I’m so sorry, officer,” my mother adopted a tone of false contrition. “We’re in a hurry to get some last-minute ornaments for our Christmas tree, which my husband’s father has managed to demolish in his drunken stupor,” her tone quickly migrated from contrition to condescension.

“Please show me your license and registration.” The officer stood back a few steps.

My mother reached for her license, which was buried inside her bottomless pit of a purse.

“Here’s my license. I’m afraid I don’t know what the registration is.”

“Check your glove compartment, it’s a yellow piece of paper,” the officer looked on warily.

I continued sobbing, attempting to gain the officer’s sympathy. My mother opened the glove compartment and several pill bottles fell onto the floor. She hastily shoved them back into the glove compartment, slamming the door repeatedly before it finally latched.

“Okay, ma’am. Why don’t you and the boy step from the car and I’ll see if I can find the registration.” We got out and stood next to the car while he rummaged through the glove compartment. After a few minutes he surfaced with the yellow registration in one hand and four pill bottles in the other.

“Are these your pills, ma’am?”

“Please don’t call me ma’am,” my mother snapped.

“Look, lady, you’re in enough trouble. Let’s not make it any worse.”

“Don’t call me lady, either,” she stood with arms folded tightly across her chest.

The officer sized me up carefully, undoubtedly trying to determine whether I was an abused child abducted by this madwoman.

“Miss, are these your pills?”

My mother rolled her eyes, trying to ignore this latest unsatisfactory salutation. She looked up, down and away... tapping her foot nervously on the ground. "Yes, these are my medications, all prescribed by *my doctor*," she emphasized the final two words in a way that was intended to lend credibility to her situation, but only served to make the officer more apprehensive.

"Why would a doctor prescribe speed? I believe these pills are used to get high, aren't they?" the officer carefully inspected the pill bottles, rolling them slowly between his fat fingers. I stared at the bushy clumps of black hair sprouting from his knuckles, wondering how so much hair could possibly grow from a bony joint.

"They're diet pills. They give me energy to face every goddam day of my pointless life which *you*, by the way, are making much worse!"

That did it. I knew my mother took pills but assumed they were just strong aspirin. I began crying in earnest now, wishing my father would show up and save the day. Officer Camacho led us to his police cruiser and gestured toward the back seat where there was an intimidating protective fence separating the criminals from the cops.

"If you think I'm going to sit in that low-life cage of yours than you're even stupider than I thought," Mom was now bellicose. "I've got company at home expecting me to prepare dinner and I'm certainly not going to let this small incident get in the way."

"Ma'am, I've got to take you down to the station. It's against the law to drive while using amphetamines and we need to conduct a few tests."

"Over my dead body!" she stood her ground.

While the officer sat in the front seat of his car calling for backup support, my mother grabbed me by the arm and dragged me to our car. She shoved me into the passenger seat,

slamming the door, just barely missing my right hand and then climbed behind the wheel and sped off.

“We’re going to get arrested, Mom! Please stop!”

“I don’t give a damn. I’m not letting these fascists get their hands on me!” she managed to make it barely around the first corner before three speeding police cruisers forced us off to the side of the road. Policemen jumped from cruisers, pistols pulled, bullhorns blaring. “Step away from the car with your hands in the air!”

I saw my father’s friend Mr. Reynolds drive past with a look of disbelief on his face. Mr. Reynolds managed my father’s investments and I could only imagine what he was thinking as he observed the unfolding spectacle in the middle of downtown Providence. My mother started sobbing as two officers approached the car and brusquely handcuffed her. They led her to a nearby cruiser and pushed her into the back seat. Officer Camacho walked me to his car.

“Are you okay kid?” he tried consoling me.

“Please don’t put my mother in jail. She’s having mental problems,” I was shaking from all the excitement, adrenaline pumping out of control.

“Really? What kind of mental problems?”

“I don’t know, she’s just unhappy. And this is making it worse.” I watched as the cruiser drove off with my mother.

“Does she hit you?”

“Of course not!”

“Are you sure? You can tell me the truth,” he encouraged me.

“No, she doesn’t hit me. My brother tortures me, though.”

We drove the short distance to the Providence police station. We walked up the steep granite stairway leading inside the station where I saw my mother sitting handcuffed on a wooden bench, her dripping mascara and manic eyes reminding me of the Wicked Witch of the West from the *Wizard of Oz*.

“Call my husband, the number is 495-8796. He’ll straighten this out,” she snarled in the general direction of the policeman, who walked into a small office and picked up the phone. Two drunks were curled up on the bench across from me, the chalky stench of their coats filling the room with an acrid odor. A large officer behind the counter jammed a submarine sandwich down his throat as he thumbed through the newspaper’s sports section. I was cold and struggling to understand what was happening. After several minutes, my father and grandfather hurried into the station.