

## Traveling Light

### FIVE

A little before two o'clock on a Thursday afternoon, Casey pulled off the Turnpike and into the Joyce Kilmer Service Area. She hadn't gotten a particularly early start, but she was pleased with the time she'd made on this foray; by her reckoning she was halfway between Philadelphia and New York, so if her luck held she'd be back in Providence by the early evening, cramming her latest impressions into a notebook and waiting for the eleven o'clock news to come on, surest indicator that she was back home. (Maybe it was true: you didn't really appreciate any trip, begin to take the measure of where you'd been, until the bags were packed away and you could start to see the thing complete.)

Joyce Kilmer. Now there was a name from the memory hole. That had to be what—ninth grade English class, maybe? *I think that I shall never see*—and Casey found she couldn't recall a single line of the poem after that, in spite of a fairly strong suspicion it was one her adolescent self had had to memorize, back when. She wondered if maybe there wasn't a tree with a plaque at the bottom of it somewhere on the edge of the parking lot, but from where she was looking now, as she got out of her car, there didn't appear to be any likely candidates.

She had just turned the key in the lock when a male voice reached her ears.

"No. Dude, she's hot."

Vox populi. Casey peered around the Honda's windshield into the next space. A younger guy, maybe a senior in high school, sat in the driver's seat of a convertible parked there; he wore gleaming mirrored sunglasses and was speaking into a cell phone.

“Yeah,” he said, “in the white BMW.”

Casey grinned at him but for better or worse he didn't notice her. And who could blame him? A chick in a white BMW: it already sounded like a classic. The woman would have to be slightly older, Casey figured, than the boy talking to his friend about her, the kind of beach goddess immortalized in songs you heard on the radio a hundred times between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Casey was tempted to linger so she could hear more of the conversation, but realized that would only spoil the picture she'd conjured. She did make sure to scan the lot from left to right as she headed towards the entrance of the rest stop, but there was no sign of the iconic vehicle or its driver.

The question, though, was what someone like that would still be doing in New Jersey in October. By rights she should have long since packed up her few belongings and been on her way to Florida; she would get a job hostessing at a restaurant or a nightclub down there, the sort of gig that would leave her free to break hearts on the beach all day. She—

A pretty black girl stood at the curb with a cell phone pressed to her ear. Casey passed her and was just about to step inside the double-doors when an older black lady came bustling out of the doors, all business, and over her shoulder Casey heard the woman bark:

“Tasha. Do *not* use up my minutes.”

Inside the doors, a quick inventory. To her left, Travel Mart, Starbucks Coffee, signs for the restrooms; *piso mojado*. To her right, a long rectangular room with a row of fast food counters along the back wall, while toward the front, several rows of tables and chairs were aligned next to the picture window that overlooked the parking lot and the highway. All around she heard the white noise of cash registers, clattering trays, and silverware chiming on glasses and plates. Mercifully there didn't seem to be any scent of cinnamon buns inside this building, which meant she might be able to eat something. One of the capped minions behind the nearest

food counter called out “Fourteen!” and Casey saw that you picked up your order there the old deli style, with a numbered ticket.

She hung back from the food counters at a discreet distance now, unwilling to commit to any of the lines, while she weighed her options. The usual suspects blared for her attention but there were also one or two franchises here she didn’t recognize. Burgers, dogs, pizzas, frozen yogurt. So many excellent choices. And for you traditionalists, when you want dessert, don’t forget the Hershey’s ice cream stand right outside the door.

But after another minute of indecision Casey pictured herself standing there the way other people might see her, and to her eye it was the least flattering perspective imaginable: the aloof, ironic liberal arts graduate, mistress of all she surveyed, deploying every last iota of that dearly-bought skepticism on—fast food chains off the New Jersey Turnpike. Get moving, she told herself, either you’re in this or you’re not. No halfway measures.

She placed her order and found a table at the far end of the room, where the wall monitors showing CNN were less obtrusive; the picture window on this side gave onto a view of dumpsters and heating vents, the non-scenic ass end of the Joyce Kilmer Service Area.

She’d compromised and gone with the chicken salad from Burger King. It came in a plastic clamshell container she could have fit both her hands into and didn’t leave her feeling too queasy, most likely because it was nearly all lettuce; at any rate it was the Diet Coke she’d bought to accompany her meal that gave Casey her money’s worth. She’d made the mistake of ordering the medium, and ended up with a tub so large it could probably have fueled her all the way to Boston. Assuming, of course, that she didn’t succumb to a ruptured bladder on the way there.

She was just taking a contemplative sip through her straw when she happened to look up and see a gaunt woman in sunglasses and a surgical mask shuffle past with her tray. A spectral

figure, advancing across the floor in incremental half-steps and not looking in any direction except straight ahead. Casey noticed a handful of other diners, rude as she was, pause what they were doing and stare.

It was the surgical mask that caught everyone's attention, she thought—a little hint of physical frailty to go along with our gas and our fries, not quite what people wanted to be reminded of out here. To Casey there was something inescapably poignant about that mask; she wondered, Isn't it a little late for that? Knowing where they were, knowing what the woman was about to drive into, a few miles north of here, she wondered if perhaps a full-body suit, the kind you saw men wearing when they were trying to put out oil fires in the Middle East, for instance, might be adequate to protect the poor woman's respiratory system from the ravages awaiting it in north Jersey. And even then she'd need to make sure the windows were rolled up tight.

"You must be thinking about dessert."

Casey turned. An older couple was sitting at the table across the aisle from hers, coffee cups and the remains of a meal in front of them; the woman wore a peach-colored top that was probably the upper half of a pantsuit and the man had on a heavy watch and a long-sleeved burgundy polo with a set of initials monogrammed over the heart. Snowbirds, she'd guess, on their way to points south or west for the coming season. The man's eyeglasses were slightly tinted.

Casey asked, "I'm sorry, were you talking to me?"

"You looked like you were concentrating hard on something," the woman said, "so I thought you must be trying to decide what you want for dessert." Her smile struck Casey as purely benign. A genial old thing, just offering a little company to a younger woman on the road all by herself. She'd had her back to the apparition in the hospital mask, so she wouldn't have seen what prompted Casey's reverie just now; and the man had probably missed it too.

Why even bother trying to explain it to them? From out of nowhere, she felt a certain anticipatory tingle at the possibilities she could sketch for these two, the scenarios waiting to be—test-driven.

But remember now, bear down *lightly* on the accelerator.

“I just want to make sure I have a good mental picture of everything,” she said, “I left the forms and my notebook in the car, and I’m too lazy to go get them.”

The woman’s smile seemed to falter; the man raised his eyebrows.

Keep going, Casey thought. Once in, you can’t reverse course. “Oh, sorry,” she said, offering them a shy smile, “I’m helping my dad. He works for triple-A. As one of their road reporters.”

“A *road reporter*,” the man said. He held on to each word as though it was a gold coin he was testing between his teeth. “And what does that mean?”

“It means he drives around to different places and takes notes on gas, food, and lodging. Like the signs say. So the next time triple-A update their maps, the information stays accurate.” Where could this be coming from? It must have been in a magazine article she’d read someplace where your choice of reading material was strictly limited, like a doctor’s office or a beauty salon. Except she almost never even went to beauty salons.

The woman regarded her with real curiosity now. “Oh, really? How interesting.” She looked up at her husband. “Well, we’ll have to remember that the next time we pull one out of the glove compartment, won’t we dear?”

The man still seemed unconvinced. “And you don’t get bored, doing that?”

“Oh no. I mean, not yet anyway. It’s a cool way to see stuff, you know?” Casey leaned into the aisle, as if ready to share a confidence with the old folks. “To be honest, I just started a couple weeks ago. I’m taking a semester off from school. It’s great experience.”

The woman nodded and widened her eyes slightly, as though acknowledging this new information. That *stuff* had been an inspired touch, Casey told herself.

The man chuckled. “Well, I don’t know if your operation solicits opinions from the general public, but if you want my two cents, maybe you can warn people away from the coffee in here. Because it is just *dishwater*.” He tilted his cup in her direction.

Casey laughed. Had she won him over, too? “I’ll make a note of it.” She tapped an index finger to her forehead.

The man turned to his wife. “Time to hit the road?”

She checked her watch. “I guess we’d better, if we want to get anywhere before the crush.” She faced Casey. “Well, it’s been nice meeting you, and I want to wish you all the best with your new job.”

“Why thank you. Nice talking to you, too. Have a good trip.”

As he rose to leave the husband said, “Drive safe, now.”

“I will, thanks.”

Casey followed their progress all the way to the entryway: the one figure tall, slow-moving, and bulky, and the other short, animated, walking with quick birdlike steps. The wife would be the one to initiate conversation everywhere they went, Casey decided, her husband happy to be sociable as the occasion demanded but more likely the one to hang back, let the missus do the talking. Probably the only subjects that would truly engage his interest were the stock market, NCAA basketball, and traffic patterns on the interstate.

But of course that wasn’t quite fair. She didn’t know anything about those people; this speculative flight was just excess, a result of the momentum she’d generated spinning the yarn about her made-up occupation. Casey exhaled slowly now, conscious of needing to let her heart rate return to something like its normal state. Triple-A. A road reporter. Just what hat had she

pulled all that from, anyway? On the spot, from nothing, she'd conjured a whole alternative persona for the benefit of two strangers—was there a name for the ability to do that?

She smiled. And you always hated improv, too. It was a minor accomplishment, admittedly, but she couldn't lie to herself. Short as the conversation had been, and as innocuous as that old couple was, she felt a heady sense of triumph at having passed herself off as someone else in front of them. Now the question became, what to do with that feeling—

“Well. Aren't you just the brightest girl in class.”

Casey looked up. A young woman of about her own age had turned around and was watching her from the table in front of her own; staring back at her were a pair of large dark eyes set in a narrow oval face. Casey noted a mass of tousled brown hair and a long arm stretched over the back of her seat.

“I'm sorry?” Casey said. The other woman's gaze hadn't wavered; there was a brazenness to that look, even more than what she'd just said, that made Casey conscious of needing to remain, ever so slightly, on her guard.

“Your little charade, just now? I thought that was pretty good. By the end there I think you had Hubby buying it too.”

While she thought of a reply Casey had to resist an urge to look behind her, to see whether anyone else might be listening in on them.

“I'm just having a little fun,” she said. “So what.” Her voice came out sounding smaller than she'd meant it to.

The brunette shook her head. “Oh no,” she said, “I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it. But you didn't take it far enough. You should have told them you're with the highway patrol, and your job is to scrape dead animals off the road all day.” She giggled. “I would have liked to hear what they said to *that*.”

Casey sighed. “They would have seen through it in a minute. Anyone can tell I’m too delicate for that kind of work.”

The woman was frankly staring at her now, sizing her up. “Maybe not. You might surprise me.”

Casey glanced down at the tabletop in front of her. It was possible, she thought, that people didn’t only do their cruising on the highway around here. As the first hints of a blush began to stipple her cheeks she felt, distinctly, that she might have strayed out of her depth; and without being able to say quite how she knew, she understood this woman would regard her discomfort as a victory.

But she was determined not to embarrass herself. “I don’t know,” she said now, “maybe I reminded them of the daughter they don’t get to see. The one who ran off to San Francisco, with her boyfriend, in his van.”

The brunette appeared to weigh this. “I don’t think so,” she said finally, “too smart. When you settled down out there? You know you’d be the one who got a job, while he sat around getting high all day. Watching the tube.”

Casey couldn’t help it. In spite of herself, she smiled. “Voice of experience?”

The girl shook her head again. “Uh *uh*. Not me.”

“I see. Travel light, is that the deal?”

A nod this time. “The only way to fly.”

“The lone driver. That kind of thing.”

The brunette was sipping soda through a straw when Casey said this; hearing it, she raised her head and looked Casey in the eye again.

“Actually, I was thinking that might be you.”

Oh really, Casey thought. And here I was convinced this was going to be *your* movie. She had the sense, a second time in this odd conversation, of needing to stall for an advantage. “Come again?”

The brunette hooked her right elbow over the back of her seat and leaned toward Casey; when she spoke it was in a mercifully lower tone of voice. “Come on. Making up bullshit stories to the nice old folks? What’s that all about. You got something to hide, or is this just what you do for kicks.”

Casey felt her gut tighten. Well, there it was, right in front of her. As she assimilated this last salvo she half held her breath and looked again into the eyes watching her from above the other seat; they were such a dark brown, she noticed, that probably unless you saw them in a certain light you’d assume they were black. She appreciated more fully now the challenge in that look, plain as the sun that was pouring in through the big picture window off to their left; and in the very next instant she realized too that she wanted to meet that boldness. If she retreated, she knew, her own reproaches would be impossible to ignore.

“Would you believe me if I said I didn’t know?”

The other girl shrugged. “Dunno. I just think it’s interesting, is all.” She fiddled with her straw.

Outside the window now a boy in a paper cap and an apron was stuffing a black plastic garbage bag into the nearest dumpster. Only the bag was such an amorphous blob that he couldn’t seem to shove it all the way inside; Casey watched for another second as the kid began to mouth imprecations at it, plunging both forearms into its spongy yielding mass. He better be careful, she thought, that’s going to pop on him and then he’ll really have something to bitch about.

The brunette was still looking across at her. Casey tried to collect her thoughts; she said to herself, Either we both get up and walk away from this encounter, any second now, or we're both curious enough to stick around and see where it leads us. And smart mouth over here knows that. She just wants me to make the first move.

In retrospect the next step would come to seem inevitable, and all her verbal jousting of the last few minutes would strike Casey as so many futile parries and dodges, attempts to postpone the eventual surrender. Screw it, she thought. When was the last time she'd made a new friend, anyway.

She gestured toward the empty chair at her table. "You want to sit over here?"

She'd had no idea what kind of response her invitation would elicit; but the one she hadn't been prepared for, she knew, was the look of spontaneous delight on the woman's face, the expanse of even white teeth that flashed forth in such an unguarded smile. The word *disarming* didn't begin to describe a reaction like that.

"*Finally,*" the brunette said, all but scrambling out of her seat, "I thought you were never gonna ask."

SIX

It was as though the sound dropped out all around them. The muted din of roadside dining, the background noise Casey had been aware of since she first came in through the double doors, simply fell away, even though for a moment at least the two of them said nothing to each other: the brunette continuing to regard her amiably from across the table, all guilelessness, while Casey took the opportunity to consider more carefully the first other human being she'd decided (apparently) to expend any effort on in the last several months. The other woman had a face that was striking, she thought, without exactly being pretty: the big dark eyes with the first hints of a smudge under them might draw your attention initially, but close-up, now, there was a perpetually mobile, restless quality to those features that was even more interesting, and an instant later she could even put a name to it. The brunette looked smart—not advanced degree smart, but like someone who might know her way around things. She also wasn't wearing any makeup, just like Casey, and had on some kind of black leather jacket over a dark gray t-shirt.

She flicked a forefinger at Casey's tray. "What'd you get?"

"I had the grilled chicken salad."

"You had a *salad*?" The brunette all but curled her lip. "How was it?"

"It beat the vending machine, I guess. What about you?"

“I had the bacon double cheeseburger. It tasted fantastic, like it always does.” The brunette paused for a moment before adding, “But look at us. We’re sitting here like a couple of old pals, and I don’t even know your name.”

“I’m Casey. Casey Hansmeyer.”

“Casey? Roxana. How you doing.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

“I’d offer to shake your hand over the table, but that might look a little weird, you know?”

“Uh huh.” Casey giggled but inwardly she was surprised. Even in the short time she’d known her, Roxana hadn’t struck her as someone who would be too concerned about appearances. Unless, she thought, a comment like that is just her way of putting me at ease.

“So where you headed, anyway?”

*Good question.* “Nowhere, really,” Casey said, and before Roxana could get in a reply she added, “I’m not saying that to be sarcastic. Honest. I—”

She hesitated, already conscious of wanting to justify her behavior.

“I’m in kind of a weird place right now,” she said finally, “and I guess I’m trying to put off a lot of decisions about my future. But in the meantime I bought this car, and I’m just— driving around. Seeing the sights.” She looked at Roxana again. “That probably sounds crazy, doesn’t it.”

Roxana's expression was sympathetic. "Not at all," she said. "But I'm curious, what are you driving?"

"Oh, nothing fancy. It's just an old Civic I got used."

"Don't say 'just,'" Roxana said. "That's a good choice. Practical." She cocked one eyebrow. "Bet you like that car, huh."

Casey had to make an effort not to gush. "Oh, you don't know," she answered, marveling to herself at what a relief it was, finally, to be able to share this with someone; for an instant she felt she understood the confessional impulse, the bond people formed with bartenders, therapists, priests. "I haven't named it yet, all right? Just for the record. But there are times when I can understand why someone might."

Again Roxana gave her a coolly assessing look. "Nah," she said eventually, "you don't strike me as the type. But you probably don't have a cat, either."

"Not yet. I'm saving cats for when I'm thirty, and I've given up completely."

Roxana nodded, took another sip of her soda.

"So, getting back to a minute ago."

"With that guy and his wife, you mean," Casey said.

"Yeah. I thought that was pretty slick. But you're not getting off the hook. I'm gonna ask you a question, and I want you to tell me the truth."

Well, this is a bit pushy, Casey thought, but she only said, "Fire away."

“You’ve used that routine before, haven’t you. About being some kind of reporter.”

“Uh uh,” Casey said, shaking her head, “swear to God.”

Roxana looked at her for a time.

“So that’s something you can just pull out of the hat. At short notice.”

Casey shrugged. “I guess. I mean, I don’t know, there’s just something about driving all by yourself”—her voice trailed off before she could finish the thought. Just what was she trying to say? She knew she was working this out for her own benefit as much as for the woman sitting across from her, but she didn’t quite have it yet.

“It’s sort of a game, you know? When I’m out on the highway, by myself, there’s no reason I *couldn’t* be that person I pretended to be.”

Roxana was quiet for a moment and then said, “Hmm. Interesting.”

“Well, don’t say you didn’t ask for it,” Casey said, laughing. “But come on, what about you?”

“Me?” Roxana raised both eyebrows. Almost coy, Casey thought.

“Yeah, you. What’s your story?”

The other woman grinned at her. “I’m doing a driveaway.”

“A what?”

“A driveaway. You must have heard of them. It’s when you have to deliver somebody else’s car from Point A to Point B?”

“Somebody you know, you mean?”

“Nope,” Roxana said, “never met the guy. But it’s legit. You do it through an agency, right? And they have to be able to vouch for you. So if the client needs his car moved from, like, New Hampshire to Texas, the agency finds a driver who can give them references and put down a deposit. And then that person gets a due date, the keys, and a full tank of gas.”

“How much is the deposit?”

“Couple hundred. No big deal.”

“Huh,” Casey said. “So you’re not making any money off this.”

“Nah. It’s just a fun way of getting around, you know? I get to check out a bunch of different cities, see if I might want to live in any of them.”

Casey pondered a moment.

“Do you mind if I ask,” she said, “what you do for work?”

Roxana laughed. “No, it’s okay.” She fixed her attention on Casey a little more closely. “You might have guessed I’m not like a real nine-to-five type of person, right? Punch the clock, ‘Good morning, shoppers?’ Uh uh. And I’m not about to apologize for that.” There was no mistaking the defiance in those eyes now, as though she expected to be challenged on her admission.

Casey shook her head. “Of course not. I mean, more power to you.”

“Well, thank you. But what that means is, I end up scuffling, you know? Little of this, little of that.” Roxana said. “Odd jobs,” she added brightly, as though the term had just originated with her.

Okay, Casey thought, so I know enough to leave that one alone for a while. It seemed wisest to steer the conversation in a different direction.

“The reason I ask is, I’m going to have to figure something out for myself pretty soon.”

“Well, you never know,” Roxana said, “things have a way of coming up.” Back to her more relaxed self, now.

“I hope so,” Casey said.

Behind Roxana’s left shoulder, back in the main eating space, she could see what looked like most of a girls’ high school soccer team commandeering several tables, a milling vortex of pony tails and knee socks.

“You’re in school, aren’t you,” Roxana said. “Or were, probably?”

Now it was her turn to be cagey, Casey thought. “I just graduated, actually. This spring.”

“Oh yeah? From where?”

Casey had been here before: you met someone from another walk of life—*of a different background*, as we so euphemistically like to put it, she thought—and everything could be going just peachy until you had to mention that you went to an Ivy League university. Then the name of the school would sit like an unexploded bomb between you and that person, and no matter

how much the two of you pretended to ignore it, sooner or later the shock waves were still going to ripple outward through the conversation. Someone like Roxana here, she wagered, might even take that disclosure as a direct provocation. But there was no escape: she would have to spit it out.

“I went to Brown,” she said lightly.

She braced herself for the inevitable sneer, or the sarcastic comeback, but as one second and then another ticked by she only saw Roxana continue to look at her expectantly; then she realized with a kind of quiet surprise that not only was there no malice on the other girl’s face, there was no sign of recognition either. In retrospect Casey would wonder whether she ever liked her new friend more than at that moment.

“It’s in Providence, Rhode Island.”

*That* got a reaction. “Oh, *Wo Dilan*’,” Roxana said, eyes wide, flashing those teeth again. When she was through chuckling she said, “But Providence, huh? Then you must know the bug.”

“The what?”

“The bug. The giant insect on the side of the highway. If you’re heading through town on Ninety-Five north? It’s on your left side.”

Casey laughed. “Oh, of course. New England Pest Control. I heard it’s supposed to be a termite.” She might as well come out with the rest of it, she thought. “I still live in Providence, actually. Right now. That’s where I’m going.”

“Ah hah.” Roxana looked thoughtful for a moment. “Little Rhody.”

“Where drunk drivers get *court*,” Casey said, and now they both laughed.

This was getting pretty homey, Casey told herself. Another minute and they’d be on to jokes about coffee milk and quahogs.

Almost as if she’d been thinking the same thing, Roxana placed both her hands on the end of the table. “Well, that’s enough chit-chat for one day.” Abrupt.

“Places to be?” Casey asked. She said the words evenly but a part of her was clamoring to object, *Wait—so soon? That can’t be it.* The near-stranger sitting across from her gave every indication of being ready to leave, and as inexplicable as she knew it to be, Casey felt the first tremors of disappointment running through her.

“You didn’t tell me where you’re taking the car.” One last rally, keep the conversation going that little bit longer.

For an instant, Roxana looked caught off guard. “Oh, I didn’t? Well, check this out. I’m headed for beautiful New Haven, Connecticut.”

“New Haven? Who moves to New Haven?”

“I know,” Roxana said, “pretty lame, huh? I almost feel like I should tell the guy, ‘Hey buddy, you’re supposed to be going in the *other* direction,’ when I get there.”

“Maybe he’s a new hire at Yale, or something.” The idea amused Casey—this could be Roxana’s day for ranging the full spectrum of Ivy Leaguers, everybody from disaffected recent graduates to tenure-track superstars.

But it seemed to make no impression on her. “Or something, yeah. I still gotta call him to find out exactly where the drop-off is.”

“Well, good luck,” Casey said.

“Thanks,” Roxana said.

Now we’re really winding down, Casey thought. In a few seconds the two of them would revert to being strangers again, like people who met on vacation and smilingly vowed *We’ll have to get together again sometime*—knowing full well they wouldn’t even remember each other’s names twenty-four hours later.

She honestly had no idea what she would have said next, except that Roxana spoke up first.

“I’ll race you.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I said I’ll race you.”

“You’ll *race* me? What are we, thirteen-year-old boys?”

Roxana leaned forward so that most of her upper body was over the table. “Come on,” she said quietly, “don’t pretend you’re not into it. Aren’t you going in that direction anyway? What have you got to lose?” By now her eyes were locked on Casey’s.

Wasn’t this what grown-ups used to mean by the term *peer pressure*? They were right to have put so much emphasis on it, Casey decided. Because it worked.

“So what are you thinking,” she said now, as though she was still only just weighing the idea, “one of us tries to beat the other to the next rest stop? Grover Cleveland, right? Or somebody like that?”

Roxana eased back into her chair and let out a derisive laugh. “Casey, please. That’s still in *New Jersey*. Where’s the fun in that? You’ve got to make it at least a little bit of a challenge.”

She said my name, Casey thought. At nearly the same instant, the notion occurred to her that the woman sitting across from her might be insane.

“In Connecticut? Not far past the state line, there’s a rest stop called the Darien Service Area,” Roxana said. “Let’s meet at the McDonald’s there.”

“Wait. Isn’t that where the two McDonalds are practically right across the road from each other? A little past Stanford.”

“Uh-huh. There’s a couple of them like that, once you get into Connecticut. Just remember Darien.”

Madness. Pure folly. “I can’t believe I’m agreeing to this,” Casey said.

“But you are agreeing to it, aren’t you,” Roxana said. As she rose from her seat she added, “Go on and live a little. You get there ahead of me, I might even treat you to a real meal, instead of that bird food.”

When Casey herself got up she discovered that the other woman had a good couple of inches on her, which meant she stood five feet eight or five nine; as they walked over to bus their trays Casey stole a glance downward and saw Roxana wore what looked like suede boots with very low heels—which made that her actual height, give or take—and that her jeans were of the pricier variety that would be described as a *wash* in the stores or catalogues. And were those flares at the bottom of them? Or no, she thought, bootcut.

As they passed the tables of soccer players Roxana looked back over her shoulder and muttered, “Go team.” Casey smirked in acknowledgment, but in truth she couldn’t bring herself to feel any disdain for the girls chowing down with such gusto, now, to her left; she would never have had anything to say to them in her own high school, but somehow the sight of all those blond heads in a row made her slightly wistful. The late suburban world, with all its guarantees and its promise.

Outside the entrance they paused, as if by tacit agreement, to contemplate the Turnpike. When you stood next to another person, Casey thought, the experience was reminiscent of watching some vast and inscrutable natural phenomenon, like a waterfall or a canyon: vehicles shooting past the rest stop in a continuous breakneck volley, pitiless and gem-bright in the

October sun, the dull roar they made already a sound you hardly even noticed any longer. *She surely does roll along, don't she.*

She looked over and saw that Roxana had produced a pair of sunglasses from inside her leather jacket—slightly oversized, squared off, and with a deep violet tint. The effect was instantaneous: as soon as Roxana had them on, she became opaque to her.

“Whoa,” Casey said, “pretty glam.”

“You like ‘em?” Roxana said, adjusting their fit. “Should get yourself a pair. Seven ninety-nine, right over there.”

Casey turned. To the left of the entrance, there was in fact an extravagantly mustached man selling sunglasses from a cart, whom she hadn't noticed on her way in.

“Next time, maybe.”

“Suit yourself. But you won't have to squint so much, when you're driving.” Roxana pointed into the lot. “I'm off to the right. The Ford Escort there, the wagon.”

“The silver one?” The car Casey was looking at was the same color as at least half a dozen others in her immediate field of view.

“Yeah.”

A Ford station wagon, Casey thought, not so glam. But then if she'd understood the driveaway explanation correctly, Roxana would have been stuck with whatever the agency had available.

She looked back at the other woman. “So are we really doing this?”

“Up to you, sweetheart,” Roxana said. “I know I got somewhere to be.”

Not giving me anything now, are you, Casey thought. Well, two can play that game.

“I’ll save a seat for you, then. When I get there.”

That drew a smile. “Cocky,” Roxana said, “I like it.” And then she turned on her heel and was already ambling across the roadway to the first line of parked cars; Casey followed her progress for a moment, thinking, Did she practice that walk, growing up, or is she just not aware she’s doing it? Because now that she could watch her from a distance she saw that Roxana moved in a kind of cowboy slouch, hips forward and hands at her sides as though she was heading—but not hurrying—for an appointment at the O.K. Corral. Whether it was an affectation or not, that walk gratified some need in Casey; obviously she would keep her amusement to herself but it was a relief to know that the woman who came on all self-assurance had at least one trait she could chuckle over in private.

Then she realized it was time to get moving. Roxana had already opened her driver’s side door while she gawped here at the curb like someone waiting for valet service to drive up with her Civic, not exactly the way you won a race. But as she made her way toward the Honda, now, step quickening, Casey felt not only a kind of pleasurable anticipation at what she was about to do but complete confidence as well, as if accepting a preposterous dare from someone you’d only just met was a perfectly natural activity for a Thursday afternoon.

I can do this, she told herself as she slipped the seat belt across her lap, I can do it and I can show this nutjob whom I'm evidently determined to impress that I'm just as competent a driver as anyone out here. When she flexed both hands on the wheel at ten and two o'clock it was as though an electric current flowed all the way from her fingertips down to her rear end on the seat, and from there to her left foot on the floor and her right on the brake, every point of contact between her and the car a conduit. She turned the key in the ignition and heard the engine hack into life.

In high school science, we learned how potential energy gets converted into kinetic energy.

Settle down, she told herself, there's still the small matter of exiting the parking lot to contend with before you get to cut loose. As if to prove the point, just as she was easing the Civic into the lane a black SUV carrying what looked like an entire family pulled in front of her from the right; Casey waved them on with a big smile, all magnanimity, getting a nod from Dad behind the wheel, convinced that with this one act she might buy herself enough good karma to tip the balance in her favor on some unspecified future occasion. Save the aggression for where it matters, she thought—out yonder.

A long single lane funneled cars back onto the highway from the rest stop and as she pointed herself towards the entrance to it Casey caught a glimpse of the silver Ford wagon two or three vehicles ahead of her. She had to idle for a moment before she could enter that lane, and in

the interval happened to notice that the main entrance to the rest stop was still visible in her rear-view mirror: tiny figures marched in and out of the double doors like windup mechanisms, a batch of new arrivals appearing for every party on its way out. She might have just as easily been one of those people, Casey reflected, wondering if she could have imagined, as recently as an hour ago, that something as seemingly trivial as where she decided to sit down with her tray would have such unexpected consequences.

Then the cars ahead of her were moving again, and as she shifted her foot from the brake to the accelerator Casey tried to focus all her attention on the immediate task of merging with the highway traffic. Her gaze darted from mirror to mirror and over her left shoulder and back again as though she was performing eye exercises and when she saw an opening she pressed on the accelerator so promptly—*and they're off!*—that within seconds she was back in midstream, Joyce Kilmer yanked from memory and rear-view alike, Casey just another driver continuing her journey uninterrupted all the way from Florida. The right lane was the comfortable choice but if she moved to the left she might be able to spy Roxana again, determine just how much of a lead the Ford wagon had on her.

What kind of poem was it, anyway, if you couldn't remember anything past the first line?