

WHAT WE CARRY

Phyllis Carol Agins

“We’re leaving in four days,” her husband repeats, placing the reservation on the table between the mashed potatoes and peas.

Mickey looks tired, like he does lately whenever he enters the house to find her wrapped in a blanket, watching TV.

“Why only four days?” Jenna asks.

“So you won’t have time to worry. If we don’t,” he adds quietly, “there’ll be nothing left.”

She knows he is talking from inside himself, just as she did when she kept watch over her mother, holding her hand and begging her not to die.

He goes to the kitchen to find a bottle of French wine and pours two glasses. “To our trip,” he offers.

She’s only thirty-five, but she’s been afraid for years. Or maybe she suffers from a kind of insanity that she could swallow back as long as her mother was

still there. Love and purpose forced her into the nursing home each day to do what needed to be done. Jenna would bathe her mother, washing both legs, under her breasts, and between each finger. Her mother moaned with gratitude.

“You always had an old mother.”

“I never minded,” Jenna answered.

“Change-of-life baby, that’s what they called you. I tried for years, you know, and nothing. Then just like the woman in the Bible—what was her name?”

“Sarah.”

“Finally, you got started. Promise me,” her mother pulled on Jenna’s arm, “promise me you’re still trying. Promise me you won’t give up.”

But Jenna didn’t think anymore about babies—not while her mother was disappearing by inches until, finally, she lay in the hospital bed, an old baby, shrinking smaller each day under the sheets. Opening her mouth like a bird when the pureed food was waved in front of her. Until finally, the mouth stopped opening and her mother stopped asking about babies, stopped apologizing for being so old. Simply stopped.

They don't make love anymore—not for months, and Jenna is both afraid he doesn't desire her at all, and then happy he's leaving her alone. Infertility must run in her family, she admits to her naked body in the mirror. It has to be her fault that those invisible eggs are worth nothing. Or maybe he's found someone else like on the soaps she watches since she quit her job to care for her mother. Her body sags with that thought. Why, the signs must be everywhere for her to discover. She knows the dust and debris of their love is collecting on the floor before her, like something that must be swept away. But she has the energy only to watch the pile grow.

“Maybe you should see a shrink,” one friend suggests. “Or take a pill or something. Really, you can't go on like this.”

She can list what she fears. The bones of a naked chicken under her fingers before she roasts it. A particular intersection in town, where five roads converge into a point and where the light is only twenty seconds long, she's counted, and she has to run to cross in time. Left-hand turns where there's no timed turn signal. And driving on the highway because of the dangerous blind spot the mirror doesn't cover. Since her mother died, she's afraid of the dark too. With every little noise, she checks that the house alarm is on, the red button glowing in the room where she insists she can't sleep without a light.

And what if Mickey leaves? She imagines herself in an empty house alone with all her fears. One night she does try to explain, reaching across the bed to touch his hand.

“I don’t understand,” Mickey says before he switches off the TV and turns away.

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At the airport in Nice, Mickey takes her arm and leads her to the waiting rental car. She knows everyone around her hates the Americans for the wars forever blossoming in their name. She tries not to think of the Bastille Day celebrations last year when eighty-six people were run down by a white truck at midnight. Trying not to remember the CNN clips of the day after when flowers covered the places where bodies had lain. There, people gathered, hands pressed to mouths or chests, heads bowed as if praying to the flowers and scattered candles that replaced once-living mothers and children. But those pictures are buckled along with her seatbelt while the notion insinuates itself. What if she finds herself in the wrong place and definitely in the wrong moment, like people are always saying on the news? Poor Joe or Samuel or Elizabeth. He didn’t deserve this. She never hurt anyone.

And there would be the images in the newspaper and on the Web—pictures that only show the feet of a body because the rest has been torn away. Her feet, her blood. What it must be like in France with those strangers all around so you never know who your enemy is, who is really hiding behind the veil, even though the French passed laws to eliminate that possible disguise. She wants to vomit, to spit out the new fear that forces the images into her head.

“Easy-peasy,” Mickey says, turning the car onto the *Promenade des Anglais* and heading west. “We’ll take the highway. Get there really fast. Plenty of time to sightsee later.”

It’s been a dream of his to spend a week in Provence, snapping pictures of lavender fields and hilltop towns. Jenna knows that the people who once perched on those hills surrounded themselves with stone walls to keep out invaders and plagues. But now she’s protected only by the car’s thin doors and not by walls ten feet deep.

“I’ve really been looking forward to this,” her husband tells her. “It will be good for you. For us.”

For a moment, she feels sorry for him, burdened with such a wife. He's following the road, that furrow deepening between his brows, and concentrating on the French voice giving directions because he was in too much of a hurry to change it to English. *Tout droit*, the voice says.

"You need to keep on straight," Nina offers because she took French in college and enough remains.

"Another half hour, and I'll take the country roads."

Mickey drives like he's on the mythical Autobahn, speeding up behind a truck and then passing it with only a few seconds of the blinker. She tries to stare straight ahead, closing her eyes to the trees sliding past and the miles of concrete barriers that protect the residents unfortunate enough to live nearby. She breathes slowly because that's what she's read, in and out like a bellows, like someone playing the harmonica, but in her case, she's producing no music. The mantra *I will not be afraid* plays along the breath of each intake. The word *relax* with each exhalation.

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She's not surprised when the accident happens. It's started to rain—even though her husband insists there are three hundred days of sunshine in this part of the world—and why would it rain on their first day? A sports car juts

into their lane from the right and speeds ahead; Mickey slows quickly, defensively. But the one behind, the one that's at least a hundred years old and shouldn't be on the road anymore and can't slow down in time, plows into them. Scratched-up gray, mismatched tires, and laden so that its body descends almost to the pavement. Balanced on its top is a hill of goods almost the same size as the car, bundled up with a tarp and tied down with intentional knots. Carefully the two cars move over to the side of the highway, one following the other.

"Papers, passport," Mickey instructs. She knows he's trying to remain calm, but can see the pulse beating hard on his neck. "I just hope the police show up soon."

She hears the words like a prayer, watching in the side mirror as the other car's doors open. Five, no, six of them. Dark men, swarthy and different, dressed in jeans and T-shirts. The three women wear long robes and headscarves—one of them swollen with a big belly. And two little kids jump across the seats in the stopped car. She knows what they are.

"Wait," she tries to tell Mickey, but he's already out the door. She sees the set of his arms, the way he's hunched up his shoulders as though he thinks he'll have to fight.

The oldest man is trying to communicate. He wears a smile, but Mickey can't understand. If pushed, Mickey would throw the first punch even though they're outnumbered. That new fear propels her from the car.

"*Bonjour*," she finds herself offering.

"*Bonjour, Madame*," the man says with a nod of his head. He's holding all the papers, a cell in the other hand. "*Vous parlez francais?*" he asks.

I will try, she tells the man, her pulse stronger than her voice. She translates: "He's already called the police. No one is hurt. That's the most important thing. He is sorry. Something was loose on top. He heard the noise, and they were worried it would fall on the road. So they slowed down. Presents for the family in Algeria. You understand, Madame, one cannot return home without presents."

His French is heavily accented, guttural, *r's* tumbling around his mouth. He runs nicotine-yellow fingers through his gray hair.

Mickey mumbles, "Maybe someone younger should have been driving," then steps back when the man puts a hand on his shoulder.

In another minute, the group by the roadside has decided. They open the trunk, pulling out cushions, several pots, a bottle of water. The oldest woman, maybe this man's wife, touches her arm. *Come*, she motions, *come*. The air is

heavy with threatened rain. Clouds hang on the mountains in the distance. Perhaps they are the Alps. Insane cicada sound indifferently in the brush. *Come*, the woman motions again.

The other women spread a blanket on the other side of the barrier. The pregnant girl—she can't be older than eighteen, Jenna decides—takes a metal stove and lights the oil below the pot that she fills with water from a bottle.

“Sit here,” she says in French.

But Jenna stands at the edge of the blanket. The women speak to each other in Arabic, while the children rest against the oldest woman's knees. Grandchildren, Jenna thinks.

Once she traveled across Europe. A backpack across her shoulders. Her thumb in an easy attitude of ride soliciting. But that was so long ago, before her mother. Once, she might have found a life without children, a different adventure, and not an accusation.

The young girl points to the other women. “*Maman*,” she says about the middle-aged woman, “*Grandmère*,” she adds, kissing the older woman's hand. Then she says, “We are like *les chameaux* that cross the desert.” She is laughing. “Camels who carry everything on our backs.”

The women press fresh mint into the pot filled now with tea. Then more cubes of sugar than Jenna would digest in a month.

Mickey calls, "Please, Jenna, don't be too friendly. We don't know who they are. Once the cops come, we're leaving."

But for a moment the fear is silent. Her husband walks back and forth along the road, watching his cell as though the solution will arrive on the screen more quickly than will a car with flashing lights on the road. The old woman stands up and takes her hand, pulling Jenna down to the blanket. There are no teeth along her top gum, but she smiles anyway. For a long moment, everyone silently watches the water boil until the tea is ready and a tin of cookies appears along with more offered sugar. Jenna sips slowly from the amber glass. She breathes in mint and tastes almonds.

The old woman points to the children eating beside them. *Them...you?*

Jenna shakes her head, no. "We wanted them," she says in English, "but nothing worked. And lately," no one will understand what she says, a freedom to give form to the words, "we stopped. When my mother got sick, I think I gave up. Accept the inevitable, Mickey says. But I think, why create a life that will suffer and die? Why take the chance on losing another person? Better to stay like this, I think. Empty but without pain."

She has spoken so softly, the other women lean in to listen. They talk to each other in Arabic. The grandmother reaches over to stroke Jenna's hand. They know whatever she has said is not happy news, not gratitude for three children who wait at home with an aunt, or the joy while they take this vacation, or perhaps news of a new pregnancy. Jenna's sadness floats in the air to settle on their shoulders. Even the children are quiet.

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It seems forever before the flashing lights draw close. The women turn in the same direction, and the men come together. Mickey calls her, and Jenna leaves the safe island of the blanket. "Merci," she says, handing the glass to the grandmother.

The cops don't touch their guns like they do in America. "Nothing to be afraid of," Mickey says to himself. She stands next to him, ready to explain.

But the cops speak English, heavily accented, the *th's* all *z's*, and sexy if mumbled in a café and not on the side of a highway. When they question the Arabs in French, the tone is hard, brittle, as if their voices are the weapons, their authority the shields.

"What are they saying?" Mickey asks.

"It's so fast," Jenna answers. "They're not happy."

“That much I get. Is there going to be trouble?”

Jenna understands the accusation. “I know the car is dangerous, packed like that,” she tries to tell the cop. “But...”

“Madame, we have regulations,” the cop insists. “All over the road—camel cars. We issue tickets. There’s been news reports about the accidents. A public menace. A real danger.”

“It was the rain, not the roof that caused the accident. I’m sure they didn’t mean...”

“Madame, you are kind. But things fall from the roof, clutter the road, perhaps blind a driver’s window. Or smash right through. What if you’d been behind that car in that situation?”

She hears this cop complain to the other: “*Les Américains pensent qu’ils peuvent nous dire...*” Americans think they can tell us...

“I think a little understanding would be,” she searches, “kind.”

“Jenna,” Mickey urges.

“Madame, this is our country and our problem.” The words sound as though they come from a book of instructional terms.

“Perhaps just a ticket,” Jenna tries.

Now the youngest man blusters in quick Arabic, his arms waving in the air. It takes only a moment for the cop to catch an arm and twist it behind the man's back, pulling it up into an absurd angle that surely, Jenna thinks, must break bones. The old man tries to soothe the cop. The women scream, and the children leave the blanket to run over. In a second, the teapot is overturned and the blanket jumbled by the jostling feet.

"No, don't," Jenna cries, as the cops push the offender into the back of the car. "They're only going home with presents."

"French citizens, Madame. Same regulations for everyone," the cop replies.

The police car disappears down the road with its lights flashing again. The others pack up their picnic and repack the roof. No one laughs now or offers friendship. In a moment, they are left on the side of the road, only the disturbed dust and empty box of sugar beside the road testifying that the moment had existed. Mickey's arm is around her shoulders, his face buried in her neck.

"I didn't want to make trouble," he murmurs. "I was just following the rules, like at home. Call the cops, right?" He is looking for forgiveness. "I hope everything will be okay." Mickey holds onto her hand, all the time, staring into the distance.

“I hope so,” Jenna answers.

She can still taste the mint on her breath, the almonds across her tongue. She knows something important happened here before the police came. An event which would never make the headlines of any newspaper. A moment she feels move in her belly—something like tears and laughter at the same time.

And something without fear.

Phyllis Carol Agins has long found inspiration in Philadelphia, PA. Two novels, a children’s book, and an architectural study of synagogues and churches were all published during her years there. Recently more than forty short stories have appeared in literary magazines, including *Argestes*, *Art Times*, *Lilith Magazine*, *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, and *Women Arts Quarterly Journal*. Lately, she divides her time between Philly and Nice, France, adding the Mediterranean rhythms to her sources of inspiration. She has recently finished *Finding Maurice*, a novel about Algeria and France during the 1960’s. Please visit: phylliscarolagins.com.