

YOU THINK I CARE / *Deborah Way*

A NNIE SEES THE MAN before he sees her.

She's on her way to Eric's. A four-point-seven-mile walk. Her mom and dad, as she was leaving, stopped their Saturday-in-November yard work and gave her the ritual I-spy. She had Marlboros in her pocket and a joint snuggled in her sock, but there were leaves to rake and chrysanthemums to pinch, and her mom and dad are never quite so KGB in daylight, and today, especially, you could tell they wanted to trust her—it's the kind of red-cheeked, blue-sky autumn day that makes them want to believe in their daughter's goodness. In the end, they let her go with just a "Be home in time for dinner," and "Be careful on Lawton Pond Road." Annie nodded. Whatever. She's fifteen and in love, and today's the day she and Eric are going to do it.

She'd been planning to ride her bike, but the very last thing her dad said as she was leaving was, "You don't want to ride that bike like that." The shrieking brakes, he meant. "Just wait," he said. "Five minutes. We'll fix it right up." Annie turned around, wheeled the bike into the garage, came back out and said, "I'm walking." She's had enough of those "five minutes" to last a lifetime. Standing there while her dad fixes. He's a banker. He likes to think he's handy.

"Here," he says. "Hold this." "Hand me that wrench." "Learn something new. It's good for you." Annie's learning just fine. She's getting hundreds in Algebra Two and A-pluses in English, and even, in Biology, A's, which could be A-pluses because Eric's been stealing the tests, but why be greedy; why tempt fate?

And then her mom would come around to watch them work on the bike, and pretty soon she'd be giving Annie the eye, shaking her head and saying, "Two closets full of clothes, and you can't find something halfway decent." And her mom would look at her dad, and her dad would say, "She's right. You don't want to go out dressed like that."

"You can't read in that light."

"You don't."

"You can't."

Normally, Annie would say, "Watch me." But today—the idea of riding off on her bike after that—it just seemed like all the way

to Eric's she'd be steaming, poisoned, it would maybe bring her bad luck. Today of all days she needs good luck. Eric's parents are in Peru, and they'll have the house to themselves and, please, she's already into her second pack of pills; she's spent how many Friday and Saturday nights naked with Eric in his bed, and she's tried, and he's tried—if she can't do it today, when will she ever?

It's an old road, Lawton Pond Road, narrow and twisting, the kind of road where, if you're Annie's parents, you're tapping the horn every other minute because you can't see around the next curve. The kind of road, too, where, at least in southeastern Pennsylvania, there aren't many houses, because the ones there are, are super-fancy, with property up the butt: manicured grounds that turn to picturesque fields that turn to woods, acres and acres. The kind of houses you're never sure if people really live in because even now, in November, when the trees are half-bare and you *could* see, you never do see anyone around.

The man, when Annie spots him, is doing something to the passenger-side door of a junky old boat-sized American car—both of them, man and car, looking not exactly like what you'd expect in the driveway of what used to be a stone farmhouse but now is some super-rich family's home. It has bushes neatly covered with burlap, all cozy and tucked in for winter. It has a garage, brilliant white, that used to be a barn; one of the double doors is open; there's a green Jaguar inside.

The man is older, in his thirties at least, Annie can tell even from down the road. It's a thickness about him—something set that wouldn't be if he were younger.

Annie's going to have had many lovers by the time she's that old. It's *not* that she wants to stay a virgin; the word itself—she can hardly think it, it gives her such creeps. She hates that whole idea of girls having something to *lose*. And the boys at school who talk like it's theirs to take—yuck, clowns—she's fooled around with them, shivering on the grass in someone's backyard, being poked and rubbed and squeezed until she wants to scream. Sometimes it's rained, and always she's sick about slugs maybe waiting to touch her.

Eric Benson is the one, bringing her inside to his bedroom, a miracle worth the climb onto the roof and in through his window, worth the ride home in a creepy cab. If her parents only knew. They drop her off at his house; they think the Bensons bring her home.

Duh. The Bensons. The Bensons never even know she's there. Eric never locks his bedroom door. He likes to torment Annie. *You forget!* he says. And waves his hand—abracadabra—like it's Eric-magic keeping Mrs. Benson at the piano and Professor Benson in his study, admiring his Pre-Columbian art. They've never even asked Eric what he knows about the ladder propped up against the back of the garage.

Annie doesn't mind the ladder. What she hates is getting from the ladder to the roof, that moment when there's nothing to grab but she clutches anyway, scrabbling at the shingles like some kind of rodent. It's lucky Eric's never there to see, because she doesn't need a mirror to know her fear is u-g-l-y. He'd have to look away.

The man nods when he sees Annie looking.

She turns her head, quickly, and keeps walking, keeping her eyes on the ground until she's past him. For a minute she thought he was going to offer her a ride, and, oh, that makes her heart pound, because she'd have refused, no question. But then he could have followed her, and who'd have stopped him? The trees? It kills her: you look at someone and he acts like that's an invitation. How could anyone think Annie would be dumb enough to say yes? Can't you see in her eyes that she's headed for Harvard? Does she not seem like a person who had parents, and teachers, and Officer Whoever who gave a safety talk at school the year the Flasher was hanging around? Does she not seem like all her life people have been telling her, "Never take rides from strangers?"

She does, of course, take rides from strangers, if you count the cabs she takes home from Eric's. Nothing's stranger than that. It still surprises her, hurts her even, that she should have to pay to ride in dirty, falling-apart cars—which is what the cabs are, just disgusting cars. No light-thing on the roof. No phone number on the side. It's not like TV, not New York. The cabs aren't even yellow. They're just stickiness and lint and vinyl seats with strange eruptions.

They make good stories for Eric, though, and even for Annie there's something great about them, about thinking of herself as so not-squeamish, like what does any of it matter, it's just her body, one machine riding in another. But that feeling always comes later. In the cabs, at night, in the dark, after Eric's, Annie wishes she weren't any part body, she wants to float, touching nothing, no eyes to see the driver with the skinniest neck in the world, no

ears to hear the one who grunted all the way home. And the last one, who had his piggish girlfriend with him, practically on his lap. Annie had to make herself breathe.

And then here is the man, right beside her, in the Jaguar, driving walking-speed on the wrong side of the road.

"Need a lift?" he asks.

Without missing a step, Annie looks him in the eye and says, "No, thanks." He has brown hair, cut short, no glasses, no mustache, no scars, at least none she can see.

"You're sure," he says.

Annie doesn't answer. A car is coming the other way. If the man notices, he doesn't care; he stays right next to her, on the left side of the road, and the car has to swerve to miss him. It's two girls, probably not much older than Annie. As they pass, they're yelling: "Suck my ass! Learn to fucking drive!" Annie wants to run after them and say it's not her fault; she's never seen this man before in her life.

From the expression, the non-expression, on his face, you'd think he hadn't heard the girls. He just keeps driving, four miles an hour, hardly taking his eyes off Annie to make sure he's staying on the road.

"You like walking," he says.

"I like walking." Is it her, is it something about her? Is her mother right about the clothes?

"It's okay, you know," the man says. "I live here. I mean, my family does. I'm visiting."

He's smiling, sort of, like You poor funny thing. Annie's ears are burning. Why would he say that, about living here? Truth or dare? It hadn't occurred to her that he honestly might not have belonged back at that house, but now that he brings it up, who knows? He could have stolen the Jaguar. The rusty other car could have been his. Because look at him: he's dressed like an attendant. All that's missing is the embroidered name.

But look at Annie, twenty minutes ago, back in her driveway. You could have said she didn't belong either, with her jeans ripped all the way across her butt and her sweater on backwards because the front has holes and Annie never wears a bra.

And another thing: Annie lies, and Eric steals tests, but she'd never tell a lie that big and he'd never steal a car, especially a Jaguar, in broad daylight with the house right there. Didn't she

notice lights on in the house, and wasn't smoke coming out the chimney?

She stops walking to light a cigarette, to see if the car will stop, too. It keeps going, still at walking speed. Annie fishes for matches. She should be relieved, and she is. And yet—it's like when you get off a roller-coaster, and the whole time you were on it you thought you'd puke, but when it stops, you think, That's it? She wishes she'd worn sunglasses so she could stare without the man knowing—if he's watching her in the rearview mirror, which she'd bet anything he is.

As she's striking the match, the car stops. Thirty, maybe forty feet away. It's like Simon Says. Annie can hardly light the cigarette her hands are shaking so—from fear, yes, but even more from the sudden, amazing understanding that she, Annie, a fifteen-year-old girl, is the one in complete control. Simon Says, "Stop."

Her heart is racing, pounding faster than it does on Eric's roof. It's her choice. She can get in the car. She can see herself there. It could be his car; he could be visiting. It's got Delaware plates: RLR-243.

There was a joke when she was little: Annie's mom said, "Will Delaware her New Jersey?" Annie said, "Idaho, Alaska."

If he wants to be her ride, let him come to her. She has a cigarette; she can burn him; what's the worst he can do? Let him back up and ask her again.

The Jaguar, on the inside, is cleaner, if that's possible, than Annie's dad's Continental. So immaculate, so pristine, that Annie drops her cigarette before getting in.

"Where to?" the man asks.

"End of this road," Annie says, and wishes she didn't sound so breathless, "and then right and then the first left." She waits for a joke about the end of the road, but he doesn't make one, just looks at her—at her hair—which is, she knows, one of her best features. Eric says it tastes like auburn; he likes to have some in his mouth when they kiss.

She looks out the window, letting her eyes blur over the trees, over the giant Tudor house that's the last house. After it, there's nothing, just land—woods and fields—and Lawton Pond and the road.

"What's there?" the man asks.

"Where?"

"Where you're going."

"Friend's house," Annie says, and wonders if he can possibly believe her, or if it's obvious that she's on her way to a boy who'll undress her, who'll do things and watch her and whisper, "Do you like it?" wanting her to like it, and she will.

The man is watching her, she can feel it. She can see herself at the line-up, pointing—"That's him"—and the cops congratulating her for having gotten away, for having poked his eyes out with her fingers, smashed his windpipe with the side of her hand, raked her nails down his face so there'd be skin samples, not to mention scars. Not that she's planning to be a victim—just the opposite. It's like setting your alarm clock and then waking up before it goes off. Picturing how she could defend herself means she'll never have to.

She opens her window. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead," he says. "I'll take a drag."

No, you won't, Annie thinks. She lights two Marlboros and hands him one. As he takes it he brushes his fingers against hers, though there's no need to, she's barely holding the cigarette. She knows the trick. She's done it herself, before she got together with Eric, when passing a joint was her only chance to touch him.

She loves it that this man is trying so hard to connect, and the whole time, to her, he's just a *ride*. She loves a ride, up in the front seat, smoking, what a day to be in a car—this car—she's embarrassed for her poor self who wanted to walk. She can't wait to be at Eric's. Drinking a beer. Telling her story. Adding danger.

"Hey," the man says. "What do you think, is there someplace I can stop and take a whiz?"

Annie wants to laugh—Excuse me?—that's like Eddie Williams in first grade who used to chase her and pull her hair and call her "doo-doo" because, it turned out, he liked her.

She's about to say "I don't know," when it hits her: a person who truly belonged back at that house wouldn't be asking her where to pee. She looks at him and says, "Your house?"

"Shit," he says.

She can't tell if it's *Shit, okay you caught me* or *Shit, I just left there; I don't want to go back*. They're passing Lawton Pond. Three boys—kids—are standing at the edge of the water. They don't look over, and then the car's going around the bend and Annie can't see them anymore.

"Shit," the man says. "I gotta go." And without warning, or asking—one minute he's driving around a bend past where Annie

can see the pond, and the next minute he's stopped on the side of the road. Parked. Engine off. Annie braces herself—for what, she's not sure; it's so daylight; she could scream and those pond-boys would come running—but the man just sits there, forever, it seems, smoking his cigarette like he's got all day.

Eric should be back at the pond, waiting, like the night in August when Annie's mom and dad were at a retirement party for some First Valley Bank vice-president and Annie was free to roam.

"Eric," she said. "Meet me." He rode to her on his bike. "I want to go on the Pill," she said. He said "Okay," and kissed her. Not like Oh, my God—just a normal sexy Eric-kiss, telling her they were together and fine, and she turned him on. "Whatever you want," he said. It seemed that easy.

If he were at the pond now, she could get out of the car and not have to worry that she'd panicked for possibly no reason.

The man is stabbing out his cigarette in the ashtray. "I have this thing," he says.

Annie's staring over the dashboard so she can watch him out of the corner of her eye, and he must sense this half-attention because suddenly his hand is between his legs. "Piss-hard," he says. "You know piss-hard?" He turns to face her, and—she can't help it—she turns to face him. It's his voice: so unexpectedly bright, as if he's just discovered their mutual interest—he might have been saying, "You know Pre-Columbian art?" "You know quadratic equations?" He could, for all she knows, know quadratic equations. His eyes are bright, like there's stuff—busy stuff, maybe even smart stuff—going on behind them.

"You know what to do for it?" he says.

For piss-hard, he means? How would she? What is it? Should she?

"You ever felt it?" he says, and then shakes his head. "Probably not. You don't seem the type."

Annie looks away from him, finally, stares at her lap. What type? She wants to tell him "Fuck off."

"Well," he says, "in case you're curious, it's like a rock."

His hand's not moving. If he means he has a boner, why not say so? Maybe she's not even hearing him right. Piss-hard? Piss-heart? She lights a new cigarette off her old one. Is this where nine out of ten girls would run? Or is it just strange, and if she ran, back to the pond, to those boys, they'd turn out to be somebody's little brothers, and in two days everyone, including

the man, would be snickering at Annie the overreacting freak.

He's not hurting her, physically. His hand's not even moving. Whatever he's talking about, maybe if she lets him talk, he'll get it out of his system and they can get back on the road and she can forget anything ever happened.

"You can touch it," he says. He reaches for her left hand, her non-smoking hand—it's just sitting in her lap, practically screaming, "Come and get me"; and now she can't move it—it's too late—he'll know that he's got her.

"No," she says, just as he's about to touch her. He pulls his hand away, but instead of starting the car—what you'd think he'd do; he must be mortified; he's learned his lesson, she hopes—instead of turning the key and starting the car, he opens his door and gets out, walks around the front of the car and paces at the edge of the woods, crunching, crackling through the leaves.

Annie could get out. She could start the car and drive. If she could turn the key; if her hands would stop shaking.

The crunching stops. She hears the zipper unzipped. She's not going to watch him pee. If he *can* pee, which maybe he can't, because she's not hearing anything but a blue jay squawking and the clutch of her own throat as she tries to make smoke rings. She wants to send Eric a signal, so he'll think of her suddenly and not know why, but the rings are puffy and indistinct, gone before they're even out the window.

What Annie sees when she looks out the window is the man, with his back to her, and the man's arm, bent at the elbow and moving. Of course. She should have known.

Maybe she did know. Maybe that's why, though she doesn't watch, she continues to sit there, listening to herself breathe, wondering if his eyes are closed, and what, with them closed, he sees her doing.

She wonders if he'll breathe like a monster. In fourth grade, the year the Flasher was hanging around, she and her friend used to do that for fun: sneak up behind an unsuspecting first- or second-grader and breathe at them like a monster. She never saw the Flasher. No one did, even though at recess she and her friends played at the edge of the playground, by the sidewalk and the quiet street. Every figure in the distance gave Annie goosebumps, but it was never him, never even a man. Once they saw a tall old lady who looked like a man, dressed in too-big clothes and swearing to herself. She headed straight for them, swearing down the sidewalk, and just as she passed and everyone was starting

to giggle, she turned and said, "Devils!" Someone screamed, and everyone ran, holding hands for safety.

When he gets back to the car, a pine needle is stuck to his sleeve. It spiraled down from the tallest branch of the tallest tree and landed on his sleeve. Annie sees how it happened because she's not really here. She's taking everything in from a dreamy distance: the trees, the pond, the chill in the air, the smell of the air, like a jar of pennies, the road, and on the road, a shiny green car, and in the car, a girl, and a man.

And then they're driving again, coming up on the stop sign at the end of Lawton Pond Road, half a mile, maybe less, from Eric's. He brakes for the stop sign, so smoothly, so gently, the car might have been filled with eggs and not one of them would have broken. Annie opens her door and gets out. Just like that. So easy it makes her want to cry. She's two steps from the car when he calls her. "Hey," he says.

She turns, patting her pockets, expecting from the tone of his voice that she left something, cigarettes or matches.

He's leaning across the seat. Smiling.

"Guess what?" he says. "You think I care if you walk?"

By the time she gets to Eric's, she's sweating all over—clammy November sweat, trickling down her back, beading up between her breasts. She got there by not thinking, by just moving forward. Pitching forward was how it felt, like each clumsy step was postponing her fall.

As she's ringing the doorbell she sees herself in the window in the door. And then the door opens, and there's Eric, grinning, stepping aside to let her in, expecting her to be delighted. Not asking what took her so long. Not noticing that she's bug-eyed and ugly.

She pushes past him. In the mirror in the hall it's worse than she thought: not only is her face entirely sweat-filmed; it's grayish-white, like the inside of a cut potato that's been sitting out on the counter too long.

She heads for the French doors at the back of the kitchen—past black-and-white photos of Eric, in diapers, toddling around

archaeological digs; past two-foot-high stacks of Professor Benson's books and papers; past a half-empty pan of brownies, probably pot brownies, probably Eric's breakfast. He's behind her the whole way; he follows her outside.

"Hey!" He's laughing.

She climbs her ladder and sits on the edge of the roof. All the nights she's been up here, she's never noticed the gutter. It's clogged, inches deep with leaves and twigs and nosies, Pinocchio nosies, the name her dad taught her for the maple-tree things you peel open and stick on your nose. The Bensons call them helicopters. Annie's dad would take one look at this gutter and decide the Bensons were no good.

She lights a cigarette. Eric's goofing, grinning his most charming grin, like it's all a game, like it's Valentine's Day and she's slipped him a candy heart that says *Woo Me*.

"I'm not laughing," she says. He's beautiful, standing in the grass in bare feet and jeans and no shirt, only a towel around his neck. His hair is wet. His hair is the same length as hers, to just above the shoulders. He uses cream rinse. She loves him for that. She doesn't want to be mad at him for having just woken up, for having slept while she was getting jerked around, for not having met her halfway. It's not his fault they could never have any privacy at her house.

"Why am I here?" she says.

"Because you're crazy about me and—"

"I don't think so," she says.

He starts climbing the ladder. She stops him with her foot.

"What?" he says.

What can she say? That she sat in a car feeling like she was five again and scared of the dark and the things maybe hiding—wanting to run, to open her mouth and make some noise, but afraid to give herself away?

They stare at each other. Annie's pulse is thudding in her neck. The ladder rung is digging into the backs of her knees.

Of course, she thinks, of course the man cared. It was just to freak her out that he said he didn't. To try to make her think she wanted him to. He cared. Period.

Eric looks away. And shivers.

Annie blows smoke at his face. "Go back in," she says, "if you're so cold."

He lets the door slam.

She starts to get up, to get down, but her feet have fallen

asleep—which is lucky, after all, because if she did get down, she'd have no choice but to leave. She will not go crawling after him.

She tosses her cigarette into the grass and watches it go out.

The only thing is: if he cared so much, why'd he get out of the car? And turn his back? Isn't the whole point to be seen? Like the Flasher—isn't the point to be seen?

She could go inside and call a cab. But what if Eric didn't stop her?

He must, the man, be so pleased with himself, driving around, laughing out loud. He'll be bragging to his friends: *She asked for it.*

Did she? Ask for it? The Flasher, okay, she wanted to see him, but it's different when you're a kid. She didn't want this other man after her. What kind of girl would want that?

There's a noise behind her. She turns just in time to miss the bottle of beer rolling by—a peace offering from Eric, who's balanced on the peak of the roof. He winces as the bottle smashes on the brick walkway.

"What was it?" Annie asks.

"Nothing," he says. "Miller. But it was the last one."

Before Annie can say anything, apologize or blame, she's crying, and Eric's behind her, holding her, cheek to cheek, smoothing her hair, saying he was kidding, look, he has another one right here.

She can't tell him that's not it, that's not why she's crying. He'd say, Well, why are you? And she wouldn't know how to explain. It's always been like that. Annie's mom, talking about Annie as a baby, says she was a mystery, that she screamed and screamed and nobody, ever, could figure out what she wanted.

"Eric?"

He nods his head against her cheek.

"Let's do it," she says.

He has to help her up. Her feet are heavy—still asleep—it's hard to know where to put them. At the top of the roof, she makes Eric stop, to stand for a minute and kiss. Always, she has hurried past this point, to be inside, away from spying neighbors, out of danger. Strange now, to be lingering, kissing in midair.

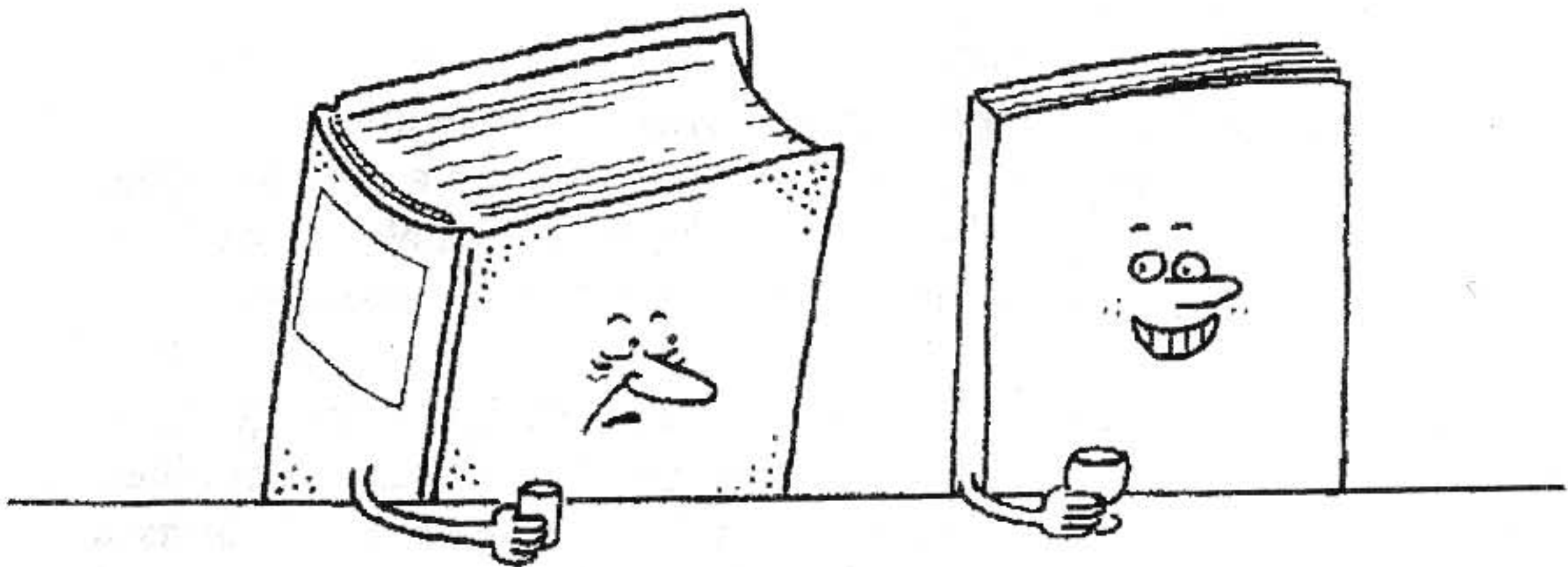
Somewhere there's a car and a man who knows.

Annie takes Eric's beer, tilts her head to drink. The sun is warm on her face. Every other time up here, she's been with the moon. There was a rhyme when she was little: *I see the moon and the*

moon sees me; God bless the moon, and God bless me. She's whispered that up here, for luck. She's never noticed before how it's not a rhyme—how it's as if, in all the whole wide world, nothing rhymes with *me*.



Deborah Way is our Editors' Prize winner in fiction. This is her first published story.



C. Garvelli

"WHAT THE HELL IS AN INSTA-BOOK?"