

Signs of Life

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WORDS

If you were to drive to my sister Violet's house today, you would find yourself at a very different place from the one I encountered on my first trip. The road up the mountain has been paved, for one thing, to make it more accessible to the tourists who now support it. Back then if you were behind the wheel of anything other than a farm truck, you were as likely to wreck an axle or lose a tire to the ruts; not knowing, I'd driven the Jag that day.

This was long before cellars and satellite directions became ubiquitous, so I only had a triple-A triptych and my scrawled accounting of her verbal directions from our one phone call the week before: "Once you turn off the main road, you go a ways longer than you expect to go, and mine will be the second driveway you come to on the right." Her voice so long after the last time I'd heard it was a cracked leather version of the one I remembered from our teens.

Not two minutes after I made the turn from the state highway, my left front tire blew in a pothole deep as a swimming pool. "Second driveway on the right" didn't seem an unreasonable distance, even if paired with the affectedly folksy "go a ways longer than you expect to go," so I abandoned the car on the grassy shoulder and resigned myself to walking. It was July and the day had been hot, but I'd gotten a late start out of Baltimore and it was nearly 4 p.m. by then. At least the trees provided shade from the angled sun.

Twenty minutes later, not a single car had passed, and I'd only reached the first driveway. I wore a thick layer of dust, affixed to me by my own sweat, and a thicker layer of annoyance: at her for not giving more specific directions and for not warning me about the road; at myself for the discomfort I'd brought upon myself between choosing the wrong car and choosing the wrong outfit. I'd worn my pink-peonied sundress and sling-backed wedges, despite having mostly given up heels by then, in order to make some kind of impression after forty-five years. I hadn't walked barefoot since childhood, but I ditched the shoes after a few wobbly steps, figuring it was better to tear up my soft soles than break an ankle.

At least I was fit enough for the hike; daily swims and bi-weekly tennis and aerobics had kept me in what my doctor said was magnificent shape for my age. "Whatever you're doing, keep doing it," he'd said at my most recent checkup. I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd soon be losing my motivation. I liked swimming well enough, but the other stuff I did just to keep my figure trim; I'd heard too many stories of women in television getting approached by their producers about losing a few pounds for the camera. Would I be as diligent after next month, when I retired from the anchor chair? I had no idea what I would do with my time afterward; like this road, which seemed to climb steeper with each step, I couldn't see over the rise.

The heat and the vertical and the pebbles embedding themselves in my feet were excuses to take it slow, but they weren't the reasons I was trudging toward my

destination. If I'd thought I could make it to anywhere else, I might have turned around. Chickened out. On the other hand, I'd done the research to find my sister, and made that impossible first call, twisting the phone cord in both hands as I worked up the nerve; also impossibly, she'd extended an invitation for me to come to her home, only a couple of hours from mine. Had we only been a hundred miles from each other this entire time? If she was willing to see me, maybe this trek was part of my penance. It gave me time to think, anyway, about the things that had come between us, and what it might be like to have my sister back in my life.

By the time I made it up her driveway, past white-flowered shrubs and even showier, more colorful blooms in boxes, to stand in front of the small farmhouse, I'd argued out both sides sufficiently. I still wanted to make amends; I still thought it would be easier not to. Even after that walk I hesitated before ringing the bell. Took the time to put my shoes back on my filthy feet, and to fluff my short hair off my sweaty scalp. Would've turned heel, too, if she'd laughed at the sight of me when she opened the door, but she shaded her eyes with her hand, sized me up, and said, "Give me your keys. I'll send the boy out for your car."

Then she hugged me.

She and I had been estranged for over four decades by then, the thread of reconnection a delicate one. As children, Mother had told us in no uncertain terms that we were never to utter an off word to each other, and it was in that spirit that we had stopped talking altogether once we'd stacked our grievances high enough. There was more to it than that, of course, but that's just to say she took me by surprise.

Full story at <https://www.uncannymagazine.com/article/signs-of-life/>