Fiction by Roxana Robinson

Blind Man

It had been raining earlier, but was now stopping. The windshield wipers began to creak. They were now leaving streaks, instead of cleaning the glass. He turned them off and they quit, sliding weightlessly down into their hidden pocket.

He'd been on this highway for an hour, maybe, though it was hard to tell, they all blended into each other so smoothly: the exit sign announcing the shift onto the ramp's stately decelerating curve; at its end a slow diagonal merge, then acceleration into the new current. It was hard to remember just how long he'd been on this one, exactly when he'd left the last.

He was, anyway, somewhere in Connecticut, on a high bridge over a valley. Below him lay the dense grid of a nineteenth-century mill town. Above the industrial jumble stood a handsome Venetian campanile of dark-red brick, a white clock face on each side. Its slate roof narrowed upward to a needle's point.

The bridge stretched from one hillside to the other. The traffic, weaving a complicated pattern, prepared for left-hand exits ahead. The signs for this place, whatever it was, were now behind him. He might never learn its name, or the source of its lost potency, or who had thought to erect a Renaissance tower above the grimy brick labyrinth. All these dismal industrial towns were ghostly now, their energy dissipated, industry gone. All that outrage over intolerable working conditions: now there were no working conditions. Ahead, on the crest of a wooded hillside, stood a large white cross.

He'd been told not to think about it, not to go over and over it, but what else was there to think about? It was what occupied his mind. Trying to think about anything else was a torturing distraction. He was never not thinking about it.

At night he lay in bed beside his wife – also wakeful, also silent, her back to him in the dark – and went over it in his mind. It played there forever, an endless loop.

The soft blossom of smoke, like a sweet cloud of scent, drawn swiftly up through the narrowing shafts into the

Roxana Robinson, a Guggenheim Fellow, is the author of the biography "Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life" (1989); the short story collections "A Glimpse of Scarlet" (1991) and "Asking for Love" (1996); and the novels "Summer Light" (1987), "This Is My Daughter" (1998), and "Sweetwater" (2003). This story will be included in the forthcoming collection "A Perfect Stranger" (Random House, 2005).

skull. Sucked down the long hard ribbed windpipe, then released into the spacious crimson chambers of the lungs. Drawn deeper, into the branching, diminishing pathways of the bronchia. Further still, into the depths of the soft honeycomb, the bronchioles, their membranous walls porous and thin. There the barrier between air and fluid was only one slight, slight cell thick. There the mysterious shift occurred: the smoke passed magically through the tissue, into the bloodstream. There it dissolved. Then it was part of the smooth surge, pumping rhythmically through the interlacing curves of the vascular complex, flowing through steadily widening channels, headed swiftly and unstoppably for the brain.

He imagined its arrival there as an explosion: the sudden pulsing release of a million stars, in the deep black sky of the mind.

He could not hold the two notions together in his mind: the physiological and the individual. The chemical reactions and Juliet.

In the dark, in the close silence of the bedroom, the sheets and blankets became heavy and tumbled. They seemed to pool, carried by some hidden current. They collected in eddies around his legs, tangling his arms in dank swirls.

Each time he remembered, he was shocked by the silence of the fact, its perpetual inertness. There was never any change.

In the morning, he sat on the edge of the bed, the weight of another day upon him, light sifting dully in from under the window shade. He rubbed his face hard, palms rasping against his unshaven cheeks, trying to rid himself of the clinging wisps of the black nighttime world.

The thing was not to think about it. The thing was to be disciplined, to take control.

Though what if he did let go, let himself think about it? What if he just locked himself in the room of his mind and thought about nothing else? Because that was what he did anyway, he hadn't a choice. He was already locked in there, and that was all there was in with him.

Approaching the hillside, the highway passed a grim Catholic church. High on the stone facade was a rose window, too small, and of course dark from the outside.

What he ought to do was review his notes, though, just at this exact moment, he could not remember the topic of his lecture. The road ahead was gray, still grizzly with rain. Passing cars made a sissing sound. He was in the middle lane, driving fast, like the cars around him. Being in the midst of this speeding stream gave him comfort. He liked the notion of community, he liked the steady, infinite supply of power beneath his foot. He felt he was getting somewhere.

Being alone was a luxury. The small rented car, for which the university would reimburse him, was anonymous, a haven. The woolly dark-red seats, the spotless gray carpeting, the bland mechanical eyes of the dashboard: it was like a motel room. He could do whatever he wanted, speeding across Connecticut among the other cars. He was invisible here, though around him he carried a kind of darkness, a cloud.

A huge truck passed on his left, the size of a small country. The roar was deafening. The silhouette towered alongside him, darkening his sky, steaming on and on. The gigantic wheels spun hypnotically by his face. His small car swayed, buffeted. It would be better not to think about it. Her hair had been in her mouth, there had been strands of it, dark and silky, lying across her open

mouth. What else was there to think about?

His lecture, it now came to him, was on the cathedral of Haighia Sophia, the ecclesiastical nexus of Byzantium, symbol of its enormous power, its astonishing beauty, its history of invasion and transformation. He shook his head and thought deliberately of the high empty space, the vast dome filled with silence. The shafts of still sunlight, falling on the ruined mosaics. The wide bare brick floor, worn smooth by centuries of slippered footsteps.

The lecture began with a slide of the exterior. "The dome of Haighia Sophia is only one brick thick. It is a perfect curve, mathematically without flaw. No one knows how this engineering feat was achieved. It is one of the great mysteries of ecclesiastical architecture, just as Haighia Sophia is one of the great symbolic mysteries in the history of Byzantium."

He had given this talk many times, at universities, scholarly institutions, colloquia, and seminars. The first time long before she was born.

He moved sideways, into the fast lane. The little red car rocketed along, the tires sizzling against the damp pavement. Its slight frame seemed sturdy and flexible, like an airplane's, designed to withstand powerful external forces. Speed seemed to be what held the car onto the road. The roar was loud and steady.

At a flash in the rearview mirror he looked up. Behind him was a big SUV, threateningly close, its headlights blinking an imperative staccato. It was only a few feet from his bumper, he could feel its heavy breath. At this speed it would take only an instant, a tiny split-second shift, for things to go badly wrong. The pace held them all spellbound: his tiny red car, the SUV behind him, the gigantic rumbling trucks.

He put on his blinker and waited for the car on his right to pass. The lights behind him flashed again, impatient, looming closer. He felt a tightening on his scalp. The SUV bore down, closing the brief distance between them. The mirror was filled with the flashing lights. Too soon for safety, he slid sideways, nearly hitting the bumper of the car ahead. As he was still moving, the SUV roared past, barely clearing his car. Spray rose from its tires, coating his windshield with dirty hissing mist. Signal still blinking, he waited for another car to pass, then moved again, into the slowest lane. Abruptly, dangerously, too fast, he slid sideways again, moving off the highway altogether, onto the narrow shoulder. He felt the loose gravel suddenly rough beneath his wheels, the car juddering as it slowed. For a sickening moment it skidded. Then the tires caught, the car slowed and bumped unsteadily to a stop.

He was on a narrow shoulder, barely off the pavement. The car was cramped between a heavy metal guardrail and the road. The sound of the speeding cars was deafening. A giant trailer truck thundered past, wheels sizzling viciously past his window. Within seconds there was another. As each roared by, his small car – frail, he now understood, not sturdy – rocked and shuddered. The grime-covered trucks steamed past. He felt the shock from each one. He set his hands on the steering wheel. Something was flooding through him, like blood clouding into water. He leaned back against the headrest, looking into the traffic vanishing ahead.

The last week: he went over and over it. Juliet in the kitchen, one morning, unloading the dishwasher. Bending over, her long dark hair falling weightlessly forward. He'd been at the table, reading.

Fiction by Roxana Robinson

Juliet, a stack of plates against her chest, pushing against the swinging door into the pantry. A wrinkled yellow jersey, cut-off blue-jean shorts. Her limbs were soft, still childish – not plump, but cushiony. Her legs were tanned to a dark honey-brown in front, lightening to a paler cream in back, on her calves.

His wife had called from outside.

"Yeah?" Juliet was vanishing into the pantry.

Ann again: something about the hose.

Juliet called loudly back. "What?" She was in the pantry then, stacking the plates in the cupboard. The crockery rattled. It was clear from Juliet's voice – loud, indifferent – that she couldn't hear her mother, didn't care.

Ann's irritation. "Juliet, would you please not walk away from me, when I ask you something?" Ann was in the kitchen doorway.

"Sorry, Mom," Juliet said, reappearing, unruffled. Her round face, her short upper lip, and bright narrow blue eyes echoed Ann's, though the dark straight eyebrows were no one's but Juliet's. She smiled at her mother, at once placating, but also, mysteriously, pitying, as though Juliet were in a continual communication with some superior self, far beyond the reach of mortals. "Want some help?" she asked kindly.

They'd gone outside; he'd gone back to his book.

What did it mean, that moment? Anything? He examined everything, now, for clues.

Juliet had been in a kind of disgrace that summer; she was under a certain obligation to be placatory. She had screwed up. She had broken rules; laws, in fact. She had been sent home. She had not finished the college year, she had ended up instead in a group of institutional buildings in another state. Her academic reinstatement depended on good behavior. Her domestic reinstatement depended on good behavior. She was in disgrace.

Though in a way it was he and Ann who were in disgrace, for aren't the parents absolutely implicated in the transgressions of the child? To be honest, aren't the parents, perhaps, more responsible than the child? Didn't they create the world in which the child found these transgressions possible, necessary?

And if you, the parent, have ever allowed yourself small helpings of private pride and satisfaction at your child's accomplishments, if you have ever stood beaming at a graduation in the June sunlight, swelling inwardly over the award for Religious Studies and feeling that in some unexplained but important way that your daughter reflects your presence, that she represents you and your codes, both cultural and genetic; if you have ever felt that your beautiful daughter was somehow flowering forth from you, so then, when another area of her endeavors is revealed – addiction, say, to crack cocaine – then you feel the heavy cowl of complicity settle over your head.

At the beginning of the summer, when they'd brought her up here, they'd watched Juliet's every move with anxiety. In those first weeks she'd acted stunned, silenced. Not sullen, exactly, simply mute: silenced. She did everything she was asked, but without response. It was as though her thoughts were in a different language. She had withdrawn. She was elsewhere. She didn't laugh. She spent hours silent in her room, the door closed. He and Ann, pausing unhappily outside in the hall, tiptoeing on the threadbare rug, could hear nothing from inside. Was she reading? Was she lying on the bed, curled on her side, eyes fixed steadily on the plaster wall?

At meals Juliet ate without speaking, looking down at her plate. They could hear the sounds of her chewing, the faint muscular convulsion as she swallowed.

Once, at dinner, Roger lost his temper.

"Jules, could you pass me those beans?" he asked mildly.

Juliet stopped chewing, the bite of food still evident in her cheek. Without looking up she handed her father the pink china bowl. She began to chew again, looking back down at her plate.

"Juliet," Roger said irritably, "could we please have some manners here? Could you please look at someone when he speaks to you? It is considered courteous to acknowledge the presence of other people. All the rules of life are not suspended forever, you know, just because you've been in rehab."

Juliet raised her head and looked levelly at him. "Just because I've been in rehab?" she repeated.

"Yes," he said forcefully, deeply sorry he'd begun this. "Manners are the muscular supports of society. They are the embodiment of its moral core. They are the basis for a civil society. You're in a family community, here. We all owe each other something. Respect. Courtesy."

"Sorry, Dad," Juliet said, her voice pointedly neutral. "Here are the beans."

Roger was already holding the bowl. "Thank you," he answered foolishly. He set it down and served himself to seconds. Somehow he had lost his moral authority. He was afraid of what she might say to him. What was it? What might she say? What had he done? He thought nothing; he could not bear to learn.

But as the summer went on, the tension seemed to subside. They were up in New Hampshire, in the old shingle house that had belonged to Ann's parents. They had always spent the summers here; Roger's academic schedule allowed for a three-month vacation. Juliet and her older sister Vanessa had come here every year of their lives, though, starting in adolescence, they'd gone elsewhere as well. Now Juliet was back in the house with her parents, as though she were a child again.

Slowly, during the summer, she had begun to thaw.

One night Ann told them about a zoning meeting she'd attended. Developers had begun greedily to eye the big open mountainsides, and a town meeting was held to discuss planning. Ann thought the Zoning Board's position was meek and conciliatory.

"Jackson Perkins might as well have invited the developers to come and stand on his stomach," Ann said. "I couldn't believe what he was saying. I wanted to raise my hand and say, 'Jackson, when we want advice from a hamster, we'll call on you.'"

Juliet was drinking milk, glass at her mouth, when her mother spoke: she erupted, coughing and gasping, milk flying up her nose. She'd briefly, hilariously choked, her napkin plastered against her face, white drops spattering the table. Roger stood and patted her back, happy to be able to help her with something so urgent, so mild: milk up her nose.

Things improved, Juliet began to relax. By August it seemed she'd reverted to the easy, sunny child she'd once been. She'd seemed to like her parents again. She liked the ramshackle house. She'd spent that summer as she'd spent earlier ones: hiking, swimming in the pond, helping with the garden and the dishes, walking dreamily through the fields. Late at night, she talked on the telephone. He and Ann heard the low murmur through the thin old walls of the farmhouse, felt the vibration of the in-

visible connection, stretching from their docile meadow to the crackle of distant cities. None of your old friends, the therapist at rehab had said. No one from that life. But Juliet was alone there in the house, with them. She saw no one else. There were no drugs there, in the sun-bleached field, the wooded hills.

Though it seemed drugs were everywhere now, seeping into kids' lives like groundwater. They were so available, so common, you couldn't ask your older, most obedient child not to take them, let alone your younger, wilder, more rebellious and more difficult daughter.

Vanessa, three years older, had been relatively saintly, they'd learned. Now through college, she was living in Somerville and working for a landscape designer in Cambridge. This summer, Vanessa had been their lifeline at times, coming up often for weekends, acting as intermediary between her parents and her sister. She told them her own story. Smoking pot: it would have horrified them at the time. Now it seemed innocent, adolescent.

What was it they'd missed? That exchange in the kitchen, between Juliet and Ann – the plates, the hose – that was completely normal, wasn't it? Or not? What was it that he should have foreseen? He felt again the sliding terror of what approached.

The last week, they'd gone swimming, the four of them, in the pond at the foot of their hill. At the near end of the pond was a splintery wooden dock. At the far end was a stand of willows, overhanging the water, trailing their long green strands into its depths. Beneath the willows the water was dark and murky. No one swam there, for fear of monsters: snapping turtles, eels, leeches. Logic suggested that all those things might be anywhere in the pond, but instinct warned that the dark shadows, the overhanging branches, were a haven for sinister forces.

That afternoon, Vanessa and Juliet stood side by side at the edge of the dock, wrangling languidly. Feet braced, they shoved hips at each other.

"Go in, then. Why don't you go in? You're such a *wuss*," Vanessa told Juliet, pushing her shoulder.

"*As if*," Juliet said, shoving back. "I'm so much braver than you."

"Okay, then, swim the pond. Go under the willows," Vanessa challenged.

Instantly, without a second's pause, Juliet threw herself full-length onto the cool green skin of the water in a long racing dive, hitting the top of the water flat, then sliding under it to disappear. There was a lengthy, expectant pause. The pond was silent. The surface was now smooth and unbroken, though somewhere beneath it was a living body, moving swiftly, its heart pumping, oxygen coursing through its blood. Waiting in the sunlight for Juliet to reappear, the others became mindful of held breath, aching lungs, throbbing heart, the weight of the silver-green water. The pond was silent. Dragonflies glinted and shimmered above it.

Juliet suddenly exploded upward, surfacing in a swirling rush of air and bubbles, unexpectedly far away. Without glancing back she began to swim, turning her head to breathe with each stroke. Her hair, now black and glistening, clung flatly along her back and arms. They stood on the dock, watching her move along the edge of the water, toward the cave of willows. Juliet never stopped, never looked to see where she was. The long movement of her arms, the thrashing kick, disturbed the whole pond. Ripples rocked across its wide stretch.

At the far end Juliet disappeared behind the curtain of overhanging

branches. The water there was shadowed and opaque. They could hear her steady strokes, but her progress was hidden. For a moment her disappearance seemed perilous, the silence fraught, as though they were waiting for a scream. Roger found himself holding his breath.

When Juliet reappeared, her arms beating long arcs through the still air, dark hair plastered over her polished shoulders, her flashing progress seemed now triumphant. Risk now seemed absurd. There had been no danger after all, no monsters. Though all those things existed in the pond: leeches, snapping turtles, snakes.

Juliet swam steadily back. Reaching the shallows she stood, walking slowly in against the weight of the water. Her face and body were streaming, brilliant.

Juliet looked at Vanessa. "So," she said. "*Wuss*."

What was it they should have noticed, foreseen?

The traffic hurtled past; the red car trembled. He should move, he was too close to the thundering stream. Though now he realized it would be hard to get out of here: the shoulder ahead narrowed to a point, then vanished. It would be hard to get up enough speed, in the space remaining, to reenter the current. The red car, though willing, did not have much acceleration.

At the end of that week, Juliet had announced her plan to go back to Boston with Vanessa. It was late afternoon, and they were all out on the lawn. The girls were lounging on the grass; Ann sat in a decrepit aluminum chair, its woven webbing frayed. She was shelling peas, and dropping the empty pods onto a newspaper spread on the grass. Roger had just come up, carrying a hammer and a jar of nails. His summers here were spent in continual battle with loosening shingles, hidden leaks, rotting wood, and creeping damp; as the house struggled purposefully to return to the earth, he struggled tinily to prevent it.

Ann frowned. "Where will you stay?" she asked Juliet. "You can't stay at home." Their house in Cambridge was empty, it was just the sort of thing that could get Juliet in trouble.

"She'll stay with me," Vanessa said.

"I just want to see Alicia before she leaves for college," Juliet explained.

None of your old friends. No one from that life.

Roger and Ann looked at her, worried.

"Juliet," Ann began. She was sitting very straight, her feet crossed at the ankle, dropping the peas into the colander in her lap.

But Juliet smiled at them. "Don't worry," she said. "Alicia's not in that crowd. I'm not going to run off and do drugs."

She'd said the words out loud.

Should they not have trusted her? Do you never trust your child again? When do you start to trust her? She'd been there with them for months. Her eyes were candid, her gaze open. They couldn't keep her alone with them in the mountains forever. It was the end of the summer; they were all about to return to the world.

On Sunday afternoon, the two girls left in Vanessa's small dusty car, trundling slowly down the rutted driveway through the field. At the bottom of the hill Vanessa gave a honk; both girls stuck bare arms from the windows and waved. Roger and Ann stood on the lawn in front of the house, waving back. Then the car turned out onto the road, and was lost among the trees.

He would have to make an effort to get out of here, to get back out onto the road. He would be late for his lecture.

Fiction by Roxana Robinson

He looked in the rearview mirror. The traffic streamed at him seamlessly. Maybe he should back up, to give himself more room. He set the car in reverse and turned to watch over his shoulder. He pressed cautiously on the accelerator. The car began to creep backward, zigzagging disconcertingly toward the cars flowing dizzyingly toward him.

When Vanessa called, the next night, they'd been asleep. At the first ring they were both awake, sitting up, hearts racing. Ann picked up the phone, Roger fumbled with the lamp.

"What is it?" Ann asked into the phone.

He looked at the clock: one forty.

"Where is she? Where are you?"

"What is it?" Roger asked.

Ann shook her head, frowning. "Are you with her right now?"

There was silence while Vanessa talked.

"What is it?" Roger asked again.

"Hold on." Ann turned to him. "It's Juliet. She came home late and Vanessa's worried about her. She thinks she did some drugs."

Roger took the phone.

"Vanessa," he said. "What happened?"

"We met some friends for dinner, and then we went on to hear some music, and then I wanted to go home. Jules said she just wanted to see Alicia, by herself, and she'd be home really soon." Vanessa sounded frightened. "I know I told you I'd stay with her. I know I did. But she got really mad at me and told me to stop following her around, and she promised she'd be right back. She came back a while ago, and now she's asleep, only I can't tell if she's asleep or out cold. Unconscious," she added, touchingly careful, as though verbal precision might help.

"How did she act?"

"Okay, I guess."

There was a silence. Roger closed his eyes to listen, trying to hear what was going on.

"Really okay?"

"I guess so. She said she had a headache." Vanessa sounded miserable.

He spoke to Ann. "She had a headache." Ann frowned and shook her head. What did it mean? What did a headache mean? Anything? "That's all?" he asked Vanessa.

"Yeah. She said she was going to bed."

It was quarter of two in the morning. Whom could they call? Was it an emergency? Juliet was already asleep, and they were two hours away.

Ann took the phone back. "Nessa, did she seem okay?"

Their bedroom was in shadow, except for the glow from the lamp. The darkened ceiling slanted down toward the eaves; on it, above the lamp was a pale blurry oval. Around them the house was still.

They decided finally to let Juliet sleep. Whatever she'd done was already done. They'd get up early and drive to Somerville. They'd call the therapist at rehab. They'd find a local program, they'd call their own doctor, marshal their forces, find out what to do. Right then, seventy miles away, in the middle of the dark mountain pasture, the middle of the night, they could do little. They'd do everything the next day. They'd start in the morning.

Of course, for Juliet there was no morning.

She'd taken no more than her old dosage, but during those innocent country months her body had lost its resistance. The cocaine vapor thundered into her system, accelerating her heart, contracting the vessels in her brain. Within the hard bone cup of her skull, a narrowed artery gave way. The tissue rup-

tured, and blood spilled deep into the smooth inner surfaces of the brain. These were places sacrosanct, inviolate. The intrusion was intolerable; an irreversible distress signal was transmitted. The violated brain closed down the central nervous system.

Closed down the central nervous system.

He had an image of offices darkening for the night, covers placed over machines, doors shutting, lights going off. *Closing down. Closing down.* He could not hold the two thoughts in his mind at once, the physiological and the personal. The rupturing artery and Juliet.

He was backing now directly toward the oncoming cars. The afternoon was waning, and some headlights were on. The approaching lights were hypnotically attractive. He had to resist veering slowly into their path. He backed carefully, swerving slightly back and forth, correcting himself with small swings, until he'd created enough room to make a run. Then he waited for a gap in the oncoming stream. All you could do was go on. Was there anything else you could do? Back directly out into the stream?

When he saw the gap, he tried to measure it mentally, looking backward through the growing dusk. How big was it? Big enough? But he could feel something gather within him, some kind of excitement, and he understood that this was the moment, he was going. He had already gunned the little car; at once it lost traction on the gravel. But he was committed, the tiny motor roaring, the accelerator flat against the floor. He felt the engine laboring, gathering speed slowly, the breakdown lane narrowing rapidly ahead. He was racing it. At the very end of the lane, his turn signal sounding its repetitive bell, hoping the driver behind him would understand his need, see his danger, Roger pulled out into the traffic, his heart racing, rising to meet the moment. It was like a plane roaring down the runway toward liftoff.

The moment the wheels hit the pavement he knew his pace was too slow. He could feel the speed all around him: he was too slow. He felt the thunder of trucks alongside, felt himself borne down upon from behind. All around him was the assault of sound, the hurtling crush of speed; he waited for the impact.

It did not come. The car behind him must have seen him and understood; he felt its dangerous looming presence diminish, fall away. The little red car droned loudly, its engine straining upward. Finally it reached its capacity, and then miraculously, within moments he was again a part of the flow. He was in it. *All you could do was go on.* But still, he stayed now in the slow lane. The far lane, the fast one, seemed now unimaginably distant, suicidally fast.

Somewhere soon, he thought – though he had now lost all sense of this trip – he was meant to get off the highway, onto a secondary road. This would lead him to the quiet streets of the university, and somewhere there he would find Allen Douglas Hall. The small band of waiting historians, the silent students – respectful? bored? derisive? – lounging in their seats. This community of dazing speed would be behind him.

At the exit sign he slowed gratefully and turned off. Curving sedately down the ramp he felt himself returning once again to the actual world. This new road was two-lane, winding through wooded countryside, but the traffic still seemed fast. It was late afternoon now, not dark, but nearly dusk. You could still see without headlights, though their presence reminded you that light was fading, vision provisional.

After the stoplight at the Dairy Queen, the road curved down a small hill to-

ward the town. On the left was a string of bright seedy places: muffler repair, Mexican fast food, a gas station. On the right was nothing: a strip of trees, some kind of construction. A metal fence, one grooved and massive band, hugged the roadside.

When he saw the man, Roger thought he must be seeing it wrong – the man must actually be on the outside of the metal fence, not inside it. There was no sidewalk, and the verge was narrow. There was barely room for the man's body between the fence and the speeding traffic.

The man wore a trench coat, and beside him was a dog on a leash. Or not on a leash – a harness? Was it possible? Roger felt his scalp tighten. That this was a blind man, making his way along this shallow gully, inches from the lethal stream of traffic?

Roger couldn't stop as he drove past; the traffic pressed him too hard, too fast. He watched the harnessed dog trying to lead the man away from the road, toward the fence. He saw the man stumble against the fence, then jerk the dog, heading it back toward the traffic. Roger passed by, inches from the man's trench-coated shoulder. The man held his head high, his chin raised, as though his face, pointed toward the sky, would help his body see. Ahead, unknown to him, the narrow walkway was about to end, slanting diagonally toward the road, funneling the man's steps toward the pavement, the hurtling cars.

There was nowhere on the right to stop. Roger put on his blinker and turned abruptly left, cutting across the traffic, into the muffler repair parking lot. Jumping from the car he ran back up the hill. Across the road, he could see the blind man yank his dog from the fence again. At the top of the hill a truck rounded the curve. Roger ran heavily across the road in front of it, his heart answering the thundering approach of the truck. He ran clumsily up the culvert, pebbles loose beneath his feet, toward the blind man.

"Hello," Roger said loudly. "Can I help you?" Roger was breathing hard. The truck was nearly on top of them.

The blind man swiveled to face him. "I'm fine, thanks," he declared.

"You're in a dangerous place," Roger said. "Let me give you a lift." The truck pounded past, rocking them both, blasting them with its hot smoky stink. "Where are you going?"

"Middletown," the blind man said, smiling at the air. He was in his forties, his hair graying. He looked not prosperous, but respectable. He acted as though there were no traffic, drowning out his voice and buffeting his body.

"That's where I'm going," Roger said, "I'll take you."

"No, thanks, I'm all right," the man said. "My dog is pretty well trained. She knows what she's doing. We're fine." The dog, a small golden retriever, stood unhappily, her head low. The cars rushed past them, loud and rhythmic.

What were the rules of courtesy, with the blind? You were meant to act as though they were perfectly competent: which they were, weren't they? Leading their own lives. It was rude, condescending, to act as though they could not cope with things, as though you knew better.

Roger stood facing the traffic. Because of the curve at the top of the hill, drivers could not see them until they were on top of them. The cars hurtled past, the wind from each one rocking the two men. The murderous roar mocked their fragile armor of skin, flesh, bones.

He thought of the blurred oval of light on the slanting bedroom ceiling, the si-

lence of the dark house. *What if you did know better?*

Roger took the man's elbow, gently – he didn't want him now to pull away, stumbling into the road.

"You're not safe here," Roger told him.

He was ready for the man to resist, to pull back from his grip, but the man did not. Instead he stood with his arm in Roger's grasp, saying nothing, his head slightly cocked, as though he were listening for something. The lack of resistance came as a shock, somehow painful: maybe this was what people wanted.

"I'm going to hold up my hand to stop the traffic," Roger told him, "and we'll walk across the road together. Then I'll drive you wherever you want."

The blind man did not move, and Roger watched the approaching cars for another gap. He was calm, as he'd been earlier, waiting on the highway. He was waiting for another hiatus in the lethal flow, the moment in which he would save their lives. When it came he would seize it, step out boldly, his hand held high to stop the deadly current.

He would save the three of them: the blind stranger, gazing aimlessly at the sky; himself, playing the endless loop inside his brain; the dog too, silky, dark-eyed, plumy-tailed, waiting sweetly to see what would be done with her life.