

# therese eiben

## PASS THE BABY

SO, ON THE PHONE VICTOR SAYS HE'S GOT A BUYER for our folks' house. Everything's set. He just needs me to come home and help him sort through the last of the papers and finalize some legal stuff.

"Wow," I say. And I mean it. This is big news. The house has been on and off the market for twenty years. "How'd you seal the deal?"

"You know," Victor says. "The market is finally heating up."

I say, "Central Pennsylvania's real estate market is heating up? Unemployment there is three times the national average." I have to know this kind of information for work, but it bugs Victor. I should probably dial it back sometimes.

Victor says, "*Hey*. I'm the one who lives here. Why wouldn't I be right?"

He has a point. But that doesn't mean I don't know my leading economic indicators.

"Well, *congratulations*," I say, a little too heartily, just to let him know I know this is not the whole story.

Victor says, "So, when can you come?"

"I'll look at my schedule tomorrow —"

"You know, tomorrow would be good for me, too."

"Tomorrow?"

Victor clears his throat. "There's some urgency with the buyer."

"No buyer can demand 'tomorrow.'"

"And besides, *Loopy*..."

He lets his words hang in the ether between us.

I let them hang there, too, while I consider asking him for the thousandth time to call me *Penelope* like every other single person I know.

I consider telling him I'll FedEx my quitclaim; he can handle the sale himself.

I consider, as I do at some point in every conversation I have with Victor, hanging up and blocking his future calls.

Eventually I say, “Okay.”

He says, “Don’t sound so happy about it.”

I say, “I said okay.”

He says, “Don’t act like you’re doing me such a big favor.”

I say, “Well, I *am* doing you a favor.”

He says, “Family is supposed to help family.”

I say, “Right.” Stitch it on a throw pillow, why don’t you?

A fine needle of neural pain has begun to pierce a singular spot in my groin. Stress wakes the herpes virus and, sure as inflation triggers fears of higher interest rates, ATV — All Things Victor — stresses me out. What is it that everyone says Mark Twain said but it was really Robert Frost? *How often does something have to happen to you before something occurs to you?*

The thing is, it has occurred to me. Victor and I are not siblings who have successfully navigated the transition from childhood antagonism to adult friendship. (I have read articles contending this is possible.) We have nothing in common any more except Flynn, and even on that subject, especially on that subject, we do not agree. Despite that, despite the advice of counselors, despite the ultimatum from my ex, I have been unable to snip the cord. Just the thought of Victor barging through life with no one to call on for help sends me signaling across two lanes of traffic and, hazards flashing, onto the side of the road where I park and rummage in my handbag for a loose Valtrex, which I find, a small bit of luck I swallow dry.

By the time I cross the Pennsylvania state line, the anti-viral has kicked in, and I’m starting to enjoy the drive. Mid-morning on a weekday, I’ve got decent speed and ample room — ten car-lengths plus — front and back. A few miles past Easton, S-curves scroll up a long incline to the top of a ridge that forms the northeastern edge of the Susquehanna River Valley. I anticipate every bend and bank, know exactly when to move into the far-left lane and floor it, which sends me flying past the line of long-haul trucks steadily losing speed. At the crest, there’s weightlessness in the pit of my stomach, and then it’s clear sailing, all of the trucks behind, only a few passenger cars and me swooping ahead into the long wide valley. How amazing to find the landscape unchanged. On the outskirts of Allentown, where once fields



stretched to the horizon, some unsightliness has sprouted — identically ugly townhouse developments and vast low windowless warehouses that house who knows what, other warehouses?

But after that, it's miles on end of a picture-postcard day: oceans of leafy green and, no getting around it, amber grain. Only the barns with their bright hex signs and the occasional towering shade tree interrupt the horizontal pull of the fields. Without warning giant raindrops appear out of the August-blue sky, exploding like water balloons on my windshield, on the road, drenching everything in sight. Then, just as suddenly, they stop. A minute later, everything's dry as if the storm never happened, like the high summer days of my youth.

Our folks' house, where Victor has been living on and off all these years, sits about a mile outside our tiny hometown. Victor always had a taste for rural; rural suits him. Fewer people to get into fistfights with.

I spot him ahead of me walking along the road that leads to the turn-off for our place. I'd know his weird gait anywhere: not hurrying, not tarrying, just steady dead ahead. Plastic shopping bags bulging with six-packs hang from his fists. He must have lost his license again.

I pull even with him, lower the passenger window.

"Want a ride, buddy?"

He leans down, and his big wide face cracks open into a grin. "Loopy, you finally made it." I am surprised to feel my eyes heat up with tears. I am not a crier.

"Hop in."

"You go ahead. I'll catch up."

"Come *on*," I say, driving alongside him, talking to the side-view of his sizeable gut as he continues apace. He gestures with a handful of bags that I should keep going.

"Victor?"

"I don't ride in foreign cars" is what floats into my car from above. Not angry. Instead, implacable. As if I should know this. He has lectured me for not buying Fords, which were good enough for Dad. He thinks I'm being disrespectful.

I say, "Subaru has factories in Indiana!"

But he's ahead of me now, tuned out, so I close the window, pass him, and take the next left, merely rolling with the brake covered; it's rutted and rocky and my

chassis is low to the ground. Mom and Dad always meant to have it paved. I guess Victor never got around to it either. In my rearview mirror I watch him make the turn. He's had a beer belly since he quit playing college ball; he looks like he could be pushing 300 now. Back in the day he was all-sports-all-the-time. With a ball in his hands, any game was on, his speed and strength winning it. Now I pull in behind Victor's truck, which is up on blocks.

The house looks pretty much the same — Victor's done some work, screened in the back porch. The roof looks new. The land is the same, too: an acre of fallow field and marsh bordered by woodland and beyond that, miles of cattle corn and pasture. I remember during hunting season we'd hear *pop pop pop* in the distance. Victor and I'd run outside to watch the game birds — grouse and pheasant — troop in.

"Victor, what did we call that field? Fowl Haven?"

"Fowl Heaven," he says, letting the porch door slam, the sharp slap of it flushing out a family of ducks.

"One of those, yeah," I say as I make my way in to join him.

"Fowl Heaven," he says without looking up. He is layering his new beer beneath what's already in a cooler. "My memory is better than yours."

"How so?" I ask.

"I never did drugs."

"I guess beer doesn't count?"

"No," he says. "It doesn't."

The cooler sits next to a big club chair I remember from our dad's office.

Inwardly I groan at the sight of all the banker's boxes lining the porch's perimeter, hauled from a storage unit I've been paying rent on for twenty years. I send a plea out to the universe that they are full of old 1040s and one cancelled lien on the property.

"You're sure Dad paid Amos back?" I ask.

"Yes, I told you." Victor opens a beer. "How was the drive?"

"Pretty," I say, turning to take in the landscape again, its late morning stillness, russets and greens. The house means nothing to me, but I always loved this view.

"I'm surprised you remembered the way."

A lone cardinal, really just a bullet of blood, speeds across the field and disappears into a stand of chokecherry trees.



Further inside, the house is a memorial to life with our folks. There's the green corduroy sofa where we watched TV for eighteen years. There's the TV, which really belongs in a museum: brown paneled with an antenna and a picture tube the size of a beach ball. There's the Barca Lounger where only our dad ever sat, legs raised; he had to keep his heels together and toes apart in a V-formation so he could see the TV. There's the curio cabinet that held the porcelain figurines our mom got from her mom. Victor and I played with them secretly (the hard dolls, we called them) until we broke off the head of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the jig was up. Mom eyed us in stony judgment while Dad reattached Mary's head with Epoxy, a mysterious little tube he kept on a high shelf in the kitchen where the liquor thrived. What good is a memory like that?

In the bathroom, which is surprisingly clean, I change into a t-shirt and shorts, saving my Eileen Fisher tunic and slacks for later when we see the attorney. Then I go through Victor's medicine cabinet. The CDC estimates one out of six people have genital herpes. I find an ancient bottle of Valium prescribed to our mother; two other orange bottles have Victor's name on their white labels: an anti-hypertensive and a statin. No Valtrex. I nudge into the open a vial hiding behind a can of shaving cream: Cialis. Maybe things are looking up for Victor. His wife left him years ago. No kids.

He sits in the club chair, a beer on an armrest, an open box on his knees. I lie on the porch planks, stretching my back after the drive while he rifles through papers. I ask him about the buyer, what the *urgency* is.

He says, "You should see these."

"Okay. Don't answer me." The hardwood feels great.

"Pictures. Us as kids."

I nod, closing my eyes.

"You, me and Flynn."

I discover that it is possible to roll your eyes with your eyes closed.

The photos are a new way in, but the conversation that ensues is the same old one. Victor wants to go over it minutely. He's thought about it a lot. He's certain we are not responsible for what happened to Flynn. I do not agree and because of that, as long as