

The Ride Home
by Nancy Martz
July 3, 2011

Marley had been on a couple of dates with Joe, and he had been at the house, so when he offered her roommate Susan a ride home, Susan accepted. It was late Friday afternoon, and friends had met after work at the club for drinks and to unwind and start the weekend.

Joe had been standing at the bar, noticed Susan and came over to say hello. The gals at her table good naturedly asked him to join them. Susan was tired from her long work week and just wanted to sink into a nice warm bath and maybe watch some television. The problem was that everyone else in her group was having a good time and wanted to stay. So when Joe offered the ride, and Susan thought his dating her roommate was a safe reason to accept, she left with Joe and got into his car. Joe asked her if she minded if he stopped to grab a case of beer on the way. And of course, Susan politely gave the go ahead.

But when Joe headed in the wrong direction after getting the beer, Susan began protesting. At first Joe just said, "I have another stop." Then he quit talking at all, and Susan's questions went unanswered. Susan became angry and demanded Joe take her home. Joe just drove and began opening beers. Miles passed and Joe opened can after can of beer and drank them down in silence. Fear felt cold and sweaty as she raked her mind for options. She couldn't jump from the speeding car. Alert, her mind racing, she tried to engage Joe in a discussion of his friendship with Marley, thinking that might bring him back from whatever was brewing in his mind about this trip with her.

Suddenly Joe turned to her and told her to "shut the hell up." Susan froze, tried to swallow but her mouth had gone dry and sweat trickled down her neck. Something was happening here, something that wasn't good, something that was likely to become dreadful. Joe drove on. Several hours passed with Susan sitting as far from Joe as possible, white and shaking and praying. Joe turned off the blacktop onto gravel. In a sheer panic Susan was trying to remember the turns he made as they went from gravel to dirt to pasture and through field gates and trails heading miles more into empty wilderness. She could see they were on a hill trail and small camp fires here and there in the far distance must be sheep herders. He drove on and turned onto new dirt roads and Susan knew in her gut that she would not remember the way out.

Eventually Joe stopped the car, took some of the beer and the car keys and took off walking down the hill side away from the trail. Susan was crying and begging God to help her somehow get out of this. But she knew she couldn't walk away in the middle of the night from this place where nothing was familiar and there could be anything and anyone in her path. She sat weeping and shaking, desperate to survive what she dreaded was to come, what was going to happen to her.

Joe was gone for over an hour, then suddenly appeared again at the car. Now he was belligerent drunk and ordered her to give him the rest of the beer. He started the motor and idled the car. She scrambled to find the case and he yelled at her to hurry up. She found cans on the floor and gave them to him. Then he turned off the motor, got out, and fell down outside the car swearing. Then

he got up and staggered down the hill side of the trail again. Susan knew the keys were in the ignition, but she was too afraid to move, to start the car, for fear he would come back with whoever he was meeting down the hillside. She saw a little hut with a light on in the direction Joe had gone. She knew there must be others all drinking together. She knew she couldn't remember all the roads and fields and trails they had taken.

But it was her only chance, and she had to get out of there. When she thought Joe must be far enough away, she locked the doors and started the engine. She drove in the direction the car was parked. It ended abruptly at a cliff. Crying and praying she backed the car down the hill, trying not to go over the cliff. She felt something taking over and she got the car turned around and began to drive, remembering each turn, each pasture, each gate, each dirt road, and she turned right some times and left other times. She was getting out. She looked at the gas guage, and it was a fragment away from empty.

Driving on fumes, she came to a blacktop and finally a town and an open gas station. She had only a little change in her purse. The gas station attendant looked into her face, asked her where she needed to be and gave her enough gas to drive a hundred miles back to the city.

Late the next day, a dusty pick up with three men came to her home where she had parked Joe's car along the street with the key in the ignition. Joe got out and into his car and both vehicles left. Susan never saw Joe again. But Marley was at a bar a few months later and ran into Joe. He said, "Susan was very lucky that night."