

HOWARD WRIGHT

POINTS OF DEPARTURE

She wanted the journey and now she wanted home. She stopped singing. The money was different and distance coloured her vision. Clouds and hedges came and went through the mirrors and angled glass, then fell away as evening slipped along the ridges and treetops and everything was the same. The map was unfolded, folded, and re-folded in squares to a remnant of itself. The glove compartment wouldn't close and the rubbish bag bulged helplessly. The names on the signs seldom varied and the roads blurred to lines, verges, shoulders, pavements, ditches—nothing like on television, more like strangers with mannerisms hard to grasp.

He drove while she rested, and vice versa. But he was never a great one for sleeping when travelling so drove more often and allowed mistakes to enter his handling. She slept when it was offered, but if he braked or swerved she turned groggily in the river of her dreams to ask what was wrong and tell him, before going under again, to slow down. Usually when she asked if he wanted her to drive he replied he was fine—his fatigue and the evening light, the junctions, the crossings, the delays, presented no problem. He was tough and acted it.

Eventually they got to where they were going, the last port, a resort, the point of departure, the hotels full and B&Bs questionable. When a place was revealed, she would inspect it and give it a grade. He parked, manoeuvred, and reversed while she disappeared, greeted, and waved goodbye to landladies pleasant and unhappy, their houses careful for appearances' sake with pelmets, tablecloths, and salt and pepper. Waterfalls lit up and chandeliers revolved; plastic fires rumbled and photographs reflected the furniture. Clock mechanisms swung silently under glass domes. Family members, the very young, the weak-willed teenagers, or the woefully incapacitated, kept well back from the negotiations in the hall.

Certainly it was a struggle, until finally, from her choosing, there was agreement on a room and a bed, if not the activity involved. Darkness, then rain, kept them safe. The cupboards closed, and she wedged a chairback against the door handle. The night was godless and the morning early. Breakfast overlooking the bay was heart attack stuff. They wouldn't be back so left what was inedible, drank all the tea, paid in cash, quickly packed the boot and made for the ferry and life where they had left it, a hundred miles to the south, between the mountains and the city.

She drove the last bit. The distance they had come made it easier. She could find her own way and he would lose and then be lost. He knew the signs. No one would visit and no one would show him the way. He was heading for a new land. She crept out from under him and kept going so he could doze and be quiet. She was getting revenge until outside was back to normal. The last time he saw her, she was out of the car and retrieving, separating, splitting, disentangling everything that was hers from what he owned. She threw the last of the money and the shattered map, tattered and torn, into the car, across the driver's seat, still warm.