

JOY RIDE

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Harry Baker was not superstitious, but his friend George was, and that's basically why they separated that day in the mall when two girls spotted Harry and thought, with luck, it would be easy to roll him. If Norman Rockwell were alive, Harry would be a shoe in as the perfect model for all-American grandfathers. His lined face, his twinkling eyes, his comfortable pot belly spoke of kindness, wisdom and security, certainly of a fat wallet and not much fight.

The fight had retired ages ago when Harry and the Mrs. escaped the corporate rat race. Pocatello, Idaho, was so far removed from the mean streets of Philly it was deadly. Dutch elm disease killed the trees on their quiet, new cul-de-sac. Cancer got her. At the urging of grown children preoccupied with chasing their own American dreams, Harry moved into a retirement community "to keep in touch with life." Cut to ten years of pinochle later, and life meant getting bored senseless on mall walks.

Harry's friend George was fussing about getting back to the retirement village and had ducked into a health food store for oil extracted from sprouted barley, so when the girls spotted Harry, he was alone taking in the electric train circling endlessly in the window of a toy store.

The girls were Brandi and Shawnell. Brandi was blond and leggy in a stork-like way. She had a brain that wasn't congenitally or chemically messed up, just addled by what she picked up on TV and in the public schools. Shawnell didn't have anything close to Brandi's intelligence, but she made up for it in enthusiasm. Shawnell wanted to move up from shoplifting to more exciting things, like a mugging if the vibe was right.

The girls' plan was to ask for chump change and kick Harry in the groin as he produced his wallet. That would force him to drop the wallet so that they could grab it and run. But they hadn't decided who would do what, and Brandi, not liking the kicking part of the plan very much, cut off further discussion by hurrying up to Harry.

Just then George came out of the health food store and started projecting a case of crockitis. Harry should eat better, exercise more, learn to relax.

Brandi smiled and breathlessly asked for money to buy her baby brother some milk.

George thought it was inappropriate the way Harry acknowledged Brandi's pouty smile. "She's a panhandler," he hissed under his breath. "Worse, she could be a *prostitute*."

But Harry wanted to remember what it was like to be noticed by a female other than one with an MD or RN after her name. Harry gave the girl a ten-dollar bill, which Brandi took with a squeal of thanks. She whirled back to Shawnell, who was moving closer, her features set in anger.

Until Shawnell saw the money. Then she blew the old man a kiss.

Harry returned a jaunty salute.

Which caused him and George to separate in a philosophical frenzy, like Pope Leo and Martin Luther. George insisted on taking the shuttle back to the retirement village rather than ride in a dirty old man's station wagon.

So Harry was left alone to go back to the girls and offer to buy them lunch, eat whatever he pleased and be entertained by their far fetched but fetching story of losing their wallets. Because he seldom gave to charity, claiming that most the money would go to administrative costs, he was amazed with himself for volunteering another ten-dollar bill for the girls' bus fare. Feeling quite pleased, he went on to the pharmacy to pick up his prescriptions.

In the parking lot Harry saw the girls hitchhiking. Wondering how big a fool he was, he offered them a ride. He couldn't hear Brandi whisper that they had taken Gramps for all they should, but she followed Shawnell's urging to slide in close to Harry because he obviously had the hots for her. Then from the back seat Shawnell suddenly remembered that she had left something at the mall.

Something turned out to be Felix. He was a clean cut lad, a cross between Noah Wylie on *ER* and Jeffrey Dahmer on a rampage. Harry was perturbed, but he had been raised to be polite. Thus the girls successfully pleaded a ride for their friend.

Directions were confused and led out of town. Harry settled testily into being chauffeur. He asked about the kids' families and got a garbled description from Brandi of traditional bliss that would have made William Bennett proud.

Harry's heart jumped a couple of beats. Felix was rummaging through the pharmacy bag to check out Harry's prescriptions!

Harry tried to calm himself by explaining that a person can't get high on a beta

blockers and diuretics, only sleepy. "And, son, you shouldn't go through other people's property, y'know."

Felix threw the pills out of the window. Harry's adrenaline surged. He shouted a curse that was abruptly cut off when he felt steel at his throat.

Felix's hunting knife.

Shawnell screeched that it would be gross to kill Harry in the car; they should pull off the road. Brandi stammered that they should use him and his credit cards for a shop-till-you-drop road tour.

Harry fought for breath. He had to drive, concentrate, not let arrhythmia push him into fibrillation. He learned that a road tour had special appeal for Felix because off and on for the last week or so the boy had been California dreaming. Felix wanted to make a Pearl Jam concert at the Universal Amphitheater five days from now. He wanted to see his name in lights. Maybe kill the drummer to create a slot for himself in the band, he wasn't sure.

The girls were game to find out.

Harry kept his terrified eyes on the road, wondering how much time he had left while his passengers winged it on the wild side. He imagined George back at the retirement community's rec room where the High Steppers would be gathering for a competition in Spokane. A widow lady had once cajoled Harry to try out for the square dance troupe, but it was the emotional exertion of the smile that dancers were supposed to plaster across their faces during exhibitions that made Harry throw in the towel. Harry's *peristroka* with The High Steppers, and with everyone else in the retirement village for that matter, was due to the facts that residents lived in separate apartments and only a percentage took all their meals in the common dining room. In other words, Harry concluded, no one was going to miss him until coyotes found his remains in the desert.

Felix made Harry believe that his gym bag contained a .44 Magnum that would make a hole as big as a baby's head if Harry did anything stupid. He also yammered about the crimes and carnage he had committed, and how he hated old farts like Harry because they reminded him of family court judges.

Harry returned fire with a blustery lecture about going to war, going to college, getting a job, paying taxes, obeying the laws of the land, even the Law of the Pack.

Brandi asked them to please both shut up.

As for Shawnell, she was tired, hungry, thirsty, bored. And she had to go to the bathroom.

They pulled into a highway oasis of truck stop, cafe and souvenir shop. There was a brief, one sided debate between the kids wanting to have what they had never experienced—full service—and Harry's being tight with his money.

The muted argument puzzled the attendant. As he worked, he kept asking silent questions with his eyes.

Harry thought about shouting for help. But maybe Felix would delve into his gym bag. Maybe the attendant washing the windshield would be taken out in the process. Discretion won over the sacrifice of an Iranian immigrant. And Harry came back to earth as he felt the call of nature himself.

The problem was, Felix left Brandi with the gym bag while he swaggered into the cafe with all the cash in Harry's wallet. Brandi made Harry promise not to try anything and escorted him to the ladies' room where she could keep tabs on him.

A glimpse of Shawnell pulling up her panties and jeans gave Harry pause. Even with the stall closed, two girls waiting just outside the door gave his bladder even more pause.

Giggling, Shawnell asked what he was he waiting for. Harry growled that he was not as young as he used to be; turn on the damned water.

Brandi complied.

Traveling in the station wagon again, Felix passed out food—greasy burgers and fries, thick milk shakes, handfuls of candy bars, and the complaint that they had asked for ID when he tried to buy beer. Harry refused the artery bombs because of his heart and the sweets because he was a borderline diabetic.

Felix mocked him. Brandi, only picking at her food, wanted to know more about Harry's condition, which got Shawnell making fun of Brandi:

"What are you pretending to be Nancy Nurse for? Didn't help your 300-pound mother who died of sugar di...sugar di...Whatever ol' Harry said."

"Diabetes," huffed Brandi. "And she didn't weigh no 300 pounds."

"That's why you hardly eat anything."

"Do, too."

"Do not."

"Do, too."

To stop the bickering, Harry asked a simple question: which route did they want to take? Interstate or keep to secondary roads as they were doing?

Shortly thereafter Harry was back at the roadside oasis, the kids escorting him into the cafe so that he could card a relatively decent meal with road map on the side.

When they were on the road again, Felix studied the map as if trying to decipher the Rosetta Stone. The girls talked about places they'd like to see. Brandi wanted to go to Reno or Vegas. Shawnell wanted to take in Mexico if it was on the way.

Harry attempted a condescending geography lesson, then out of frustration pulled off the road. He impulsively grabbed the map and yelled that they were all going to Southern California or his name wasn't Harry Baker!

When the sun next rose over the Great Basin, Harry was still at the wheel. The backs of his eyeballs itched; his stomach felt queasy; he struggled to bring oxygen and some order to the thoughts chasing each other round and round in his brain. How could he get out of this mess? Neither fear nor anger worked. What could he do?

Brandi was curled up in the front seat; Shawnell dozed in back next to Felix, who made fuming look peaceful. Harry's gaze roved from Brandi's thighs to Felix's heavily lidded eyes. Harry's hand reached out cautiously.

He turned down the radio. Now he could think!

Slowly the girls stirred. Something was wrong; what had happened?

Felix yanked Harry by the hair, brought the knife to his Adam's apple. "Do you think you're a big man because you can read a map? You think you're in charge now? You'd better get Snoop back on, or you're going to be a dead Doggie Dog!"

Harry pumped up the volume. Felix dropped back, satisfied, then for Shawnell's sake decided they were going to the homeland of Taco Bell whether it was on the

way to California or not.

Shawnell unleashed a grateful squeal. She wrapped herself around Felix, nipping at an ear and kissing his mouth, driving her tongue into both.

Tears sprouted in Harry's eyes from fear and fury, exhaustion and low blood sugar. He ranted that this was his car, and in *his* car, by God, he was not going to put up with gross public displays of affection.

Brandi shouted for him to watch the road; they were going to crash.

Harry let go of the wheel. "*Now* you want to drive *my* car. Fine! *Drive!*"

As Brandi tried to climb over Harry to take charge of the swerving car, Felix's head came up to see why he was being bucked off Shawnell. That's when he saw the lights and siren of a Nevada State Trooper.

Brandi babbled to the trooper, "G-g-grandpa is taking us to our parents in Hollywood. He's a little screwed up in the head, and he fell asleep at the wheel."

Harry snapped, "Do I look like the kind of man who would fill his car with punks who act like weasels in rut?!"

"Weasels in huh?" asked the trooper.

"They throw candy wrappers out the window!"

The trooper asked Harry to please step outside. As they talked in hushed tones, Felix urged Brandi to drive off while they still had a chance.

But then the trooper was back, hand on his sidearm, asking Felix to please give him the gym bag.

Harry smugly watched Felix. Felix handed over the gym bag with no more protest than a sad look and a shake of his head.

The trooper and Harry inspected its contents—dirty clothes, CDs and a copy of *Guns & Ammo*. The trooper gave Harry a withering look. Disappointment came like a flood, palpable and irresistible. Harry watched impotently as the trooper engaged in a whispered conversation with his kidnappers.

Brandi was very angry when she finally drove away. Felix made Shawnell giggle by mimicking the trooper: maybe the youngsters should take Gramps to a doctor

in Elko, and, y'know, get the top story checked out before putting him behind the wheel again.

Harry grumbled that he wouldn't be fooled any more. Big talk, no gun; Felix probably wouldn't even know how to use one.

Brandi cut in, berating Harry for breaking his promise not to try anything. He was supposed to be a man of his word even if the word went back to the rest room yesterday. Who did he think he was, calling her friends animals and punks?

As Felix started to cheer her on, Brandi turned on him, too. "You *are* just big talk!"

Hours later Harry came out of a fitful nap. His station wagon was parked at the curb of a sporting goods store in place called Jigs, Nevada. Unwashed and unshaven, he was beginning to look like a bag lady. Pulse thready, he felt worse. The blessing of Harry's daze was that it smothered the fear that he would probably die of a myocardial infarction just before the cold slash of Felix's knife.

Inside the store Shawnell flirted with a cowboy clerk while Felix tried out a baseball bat on the clerk's head. Then Felix smashed a display case for shiny new guns. An alarm went off.

Harry groggily questioned Brandi about what was going on. She said petulantly, "It's all your fault. You should have left well enough alone."

Felix and Shawnell jumped in the car. Brandi left a patch of smoking rubber. Snorting with laughter, Felix loaded his newly acquired semi-auto, took pots shots at a stop sign and then turned on Harry. Did Gramps really think he was just big talk? Because if Gramps didn't beg for forgiveness right now, Mr. Glock Nine Millimeter was going to do all the talking.

Not in his right mind, Harry told Felix to shove the pistol where the sun don't shine.

Just as Felix was thinking he'd have to squeeze off a round, Harry pitched forward. His forehead bounced off the dash; he slumped to the floorwell.

Brandi's eyes bugged with horror. Shawnell gasped, "Felix! You scared him to death!"

Brandi accelerated. Twenty minutes later the station wagon was three miles from the asphalt and parked at the side of a dirt road. The kids half dragged, half

carried Harry's body toward a clump of cottonwood. Felix rationalized that he didn't do anything, but Brandi drew Shawnell to her point of view—kidnapping, grand theft auto, assault and battery, smash and grab robbery, not to mention involuntary manslaughter, weren't exactly nothing. They'd all probably end up on a correctional farm until they were twenty-one.

A weak groan from Harry spelled relief.

Shawnell thought they should just leave him and maybe call an ambulance or something once they got back on the highway. Felix added that he could always use the gun to rob their way to LA.

After Brandi sighed derisively, "Why can't we just stick with the original plan?" her cohorts wanted to know what that was. Brandi grabbed Harry's wallet from Felix, explaining that they needed Gramps *and* his credit cards.

Thinking he was with the program, Felix slapped Harry's face, asked who FKA Prince was, what day it was, name Brandon Lee's last movie. Harry's incomprehensible mutterings made Felix conclude that Gramps couldn't write his name.

Brandi rasped, "You are so lame. We have to get him well first!"

Duckwater, Nevada. The drug store.

Brandi blithely told the pharmacist her grandfather's symptoms while Felix checked out the condom display. Brandi's eyes lit up to a couple of brand names on the list of possible drugs, ordered a couple of more to make sure, then got wary when the pharmacist asked for prescriptions.

Felix raised his German play thing. "Hey, Jack, we don't need no prescriptions."

With Shawnell and Felix taking the front seat, Brandi cradled Harry head on her lap and forced pills into his mouth. He spluttered and coughed, but they went down.

While Harry was coming back to life, his busy daughter on the East Coast was piqued that Dad wasn't answering his phone. She called the retirement community's administrator who believed Harry might be with the High Steppers. "If he's not home tomorrow," the administrator promised, "I'll give you a buzz." The daughter gave three different numbers and an answering service to try.

Back on two-lane blacktop "Fairy tales can come true, they can happen to you..."

Shawnell was playing braindead music to see if it would revive Gramps. Felix wasn't fighting it because it was so irritating it kept him awake as designated driver.

Harry returned from the Land of Nod and saw an angel stroking his brow. "Sheesh," he told Brandi, "your breath stinks." She laughed that he was no advertisement for Stussy.

Felix wondered what happened to Nevada. Man, they must have been snatched by aliens. They were experiencing missing time. The signpost up ahead said Welcome To Arizona.

That evening they pulled into a town called Baghdad and decided to stay at the newer looking of its two motels. First, though, the kids supported a still woozy Harry so that he could sign for inventory from a general store—food, three cases of 16-ounce cans of beer, toiletries, a length of rope and Western clothes that were in style when The Sons of the Pioneers were a going concern.

The rope was for tying Harry to one of two double beds in a room with kitchenette at the Baghdad Motor Lodge. There was some slack in the rope, so it wasn't so bad. Besides, he had been allowed to wash up and change into new underwear. He almost felt spry. He peeked toward where Brandi was going through her ablutions. He listened to Shawnell and Felix bang their king sized bed against the adjoining wall. He thought untoward thoughts.

With his mouth Harry furtively worked the phone off the hook. It took time. He finally raised the Pakistani manning the front desk just as Brandi came out the bathroom.

Harry acted like an errant child; she sounded like an irate mother. She had saved his lousy life, and this was the thanks she got? All right, she would cinch him down so that the blood stopped flowing and he could mess himself in the night unless he promised to start acting responsible. Harry told Brandi to go to hell.

She petulantly opened a Tall Boy. He looked at it longingly and told her she was too young for beer. Thus they started to communicate. When did you become my judge versus why do you hang out with losers?

Brandi shouted that if her friends were losers, they would have grabbed some feel good pills at the drug store when they had a chance. "Chance" ignited another association. Brandi never had a chance. Nor did her mother who was an unwed, crazy tub of lard. Then it was one crummy foster home after another.

Brandi didn't have the good life like ol' Harry.

He shouted that getting old and sick with no friends but with two children who thought he owed them the favor was hardly the life of Riley.

There was more banging on the wall. Felix's fist. He hollered for them to shut up.

They talked quietly. Harry asked if Brandi had a boyfriend like Felix. Brandi shocked Harry with the fact that she was a virgin, and she didn't plan wasting that status on a poseur. His question, "Who then?" didn't elicit a reality check. She wanted to find a rock star who would marry her; then they'd live in a big house and be on *Lifestyles Of The Rich & Famous*. Harry suggested college in case a white knight didn't come along any time soon. Brandi chuckled sardonically and turned off the light.

After a moment she asked about his wife. Harry told a nice story, short and bitter-sweet, how their honeymoon was a hunting trip because she knew how much he loved camping out. But real life took over because he was a workaholic, too, and didn't really get to know the woman who spent forty-nine years with him.

There was silence; then Harry whispered that he wouldn't try anything for eight hours if Brandi would just untie him.

A few more moments of silence. Then her bed creaked. She released his bonds. He asked if she was finished with the beer. Yeah, he could have it. He lay back, took a sip and repeated, "Drinking's bad for a girl your age."

Brandi gave him a wry look and turned over.

In the morning a Las Vegas TV station broadcast the news from the back of beyond. The owner of a northeastern Nevada sporting goods store was in a coma. Surveillance videos from the store and from a pharmacy in another town caught each of the kids in fuzzy black and white.

In a panic Felix shook Shawnell awake. As the newsroom anchor speculated about a possible sick family member traveling with the rampaging teens, Felix rushed to the next room and pounded on the door.

Brandi woke with a start. Harry was gone. Felix backhanded her, told her to be ready to go in thirty seconds, and if they had any more time, he'd blow her head off.

Harry was drinking decaf and eating oatmeal in the motel coffee shop, leisurely reading *The Arizona Republic*. He didn't see his station wagon speed past then slowly back up.

Eye swollen, Brandi sat sullenly behind the wheel. Shawnell pleaded with Felix not to do anything stupid.

The local constables dunking doughnuts at the counter didn't notice the kid entering with a menacing bulge under his windbreaker. Felix slid into Harry's booth. With edgy calm Felix asked, "Wha's up?"

Harry pushed the entertainment section of the paper across to Felix and reported, "You got the date wrong. The Whatchamacallit concert's tonight, not three days from now. Why don't you give up this crazy joy ride? The authorities will see that I'm fine, and they'll probably go easy on you and the girls."

Felix smiled. Clearly, Gramps didn't know squat about the guy in a coma.

In the car Harry learned the details of the gun store hold up. Brandi thanked him for keeping his word and not causing trouble, but Harry realized this was no longer a game for an aging Boy Scout. Whether Brandi recognized it or not, she was as much a hostage as he was. Shawnell could swing either way. Felix was an overgrown child, feeling more and more trapped, and consequently increasingly dangerous to everyone, including himself.

Meanwhile 425 miles to the northeast, the retirement village administrator spotted two newspapers outside Harry's door. She found George breakfasting in the dining commons and learned that Harry wouldn't be caught dead with the High Steppers.

The administrator let herself into Harry's apartment. She expected to find that he had passed on and hoped that his space could be quickly leased to another turnover. But now she had to call the daughter's answering service to relay the message that something wasn't quite right.

Late that afternoon Harry was driving. Felix ordered Brandi to find some news on the radio. They learned that throughout the southwest there was a BOL for Harry Baker, who was a possible kidnap victim abducted by three Idaho youths suspected of a Nevada crime spree. Sources close to the investigation gave their last whereabouts as Baghdad, Arizona. Felix was outraged. How could the cops know all that?

Shawnell suggested that Gramps must have family who reported him missing. Brandi said that poor Harry didn't have a family who gave a damn.

"Friends?" offered Shawnell.

"Not those either," answered Brandi.

With a smirk Felix wondered what had happened last night that made Brandi and Gramps so close. Brandi's arm whipped back to smack Felix, but he caught her hand in his fist. He began massaging it so hard, her fingers threaten to break.

Harry fought to keep his breathing regular. He had to play it cagey. The world may know of his plight, but the world was planets removed from being able to do anything about it.

All the while Felix talked as if he was completely preoccupied in solving the mystery of why the cops knew so much. OK, somebody, somehow reported Gramps missing. But how did Felix and the girls get associated with Harry? Nothing on any surveillance video would have put them together. Maybe the cat was out of the bag because Brandi missed an appointment with her Delinquency Case Worker.

Eyes smarting with tears, Brandi swore that she didn't.

Felix's wild gaze turned on Shawnell. Maybe the father who liked to play with her, he got to missing his little girl, and so he went to the cops and told them all about the bad company she keeps.

Shawnell stammered that her father wouldn't go to the cops for her sake.

"Yeah, man, well, somebody practically knows where we are, like there's a traitor here!"

Harry spoke with exaggerated calm: "Hey, Felix, why don't you just have a beer and settle down?:"

"Because they're warm, that's why!"

Seeing the pain etched in Brandi's face, Shawnell whimpered, "Then let's get some ice!"

"Please," sobbed Brandi.

Yeah. Felix liked how please sounded when Brandi meant it.

So Harry could feel Felix's breath bristling the hairs on the back of his neck when they stopped again. Felix watched the girls load up the counter of a crossroads convenience store about two miles from the California border. He slipped Harry a credit card, but as Harry started to offer it to the clerk, Felix's left brain kicked in. "We've changed our mind," he said. He nervously urged his companions outside.

"It's the frigging plastic that's giving us away. Gramps, you just outlived your usefulness."

"Yeah?" grinned Harry, "then tell that to them." He nodded to the sheriff's deputies arriving to block the intersection.

Minutes later sweat glistened on Harry's face as he nosed his wagon up to a deputy setting up a barrier. Harry was sure that his heart was about to take a once-in-a-lifetime message from the Xth Cranial Nerve, that one that says, "Stop." But Damn! Harry told himself, you worry about minor problems like that, and you'll turn out to be George.

The faxed photo of Harry didn't do him justice, and as the deputy took a harried look into the car, he saw only Felix lying under blankets in the back.

He didn't see Felix's pistol pressed against Brandi's skull. But it was hot and crowded down there, and Shawnell wriggled with an itch. Felix turned it into a convincing spasm.

To the deputy's query, Harry muttered that his nephew had meningitis and needed to go to the hospital in Blythe. The dep backed off quickly and waved the car through like a leper.

But the deputy's sergeant could recognize Idaho plates when he saw them.

While the kids unscrambled from under the blanket, Harry pointed them into the California sunset. But he was quickly forced to push pedal to the metal and lead a high speed chase through the Mojave. There were moments when it seemed as if he was enjoying it. When Felix started back seat driving, Harry threatened, "You can take over if you want."

Felix responded, "No, no, dude, that's cool," and he fired off some shots just to let the posse know they were serious.

Harry lost the law by cutting across country. The fear inside was gone. A bone jarring thump set the anger free, too.

When the station wagon bottomed out, everyone bailed, Harry as hyper as his kidnappers, who wanted to know how he had learned to drive like that.

"Tarawa. Light Tanks Amphibious."

They didn't get it. Harry wasn't sure he did, either. But he rallied the kids into organizing a *Flight Of The Phoenix* for his station wagon. They got it unstuck and rattling on to nowhere, sans tail pipe and with leaking radiator.

In the dead of night they sputtered to a stop. A shack listed in the darkness ahead. Felix wanted to go in like Stephen Segal. Harry told him to stow it.

Once Harry established that the shack was abandoned, he organized a hunt for water and tools. Brandi whispered to her benefactor that Harry shouldn't act too cocky because Felix looked like he was freaking out.

Dry swallowing his pills, Harry said, "So am I."

Brandi and Shawnell exchanged a fretful look.

Harry worked on the car's radiator and on Felix's head, telling all he that knew about the former and suggesting that the youngster might enjoy studying mechanics. Felix scowled that he hadn't graduated from high school. Harry assured him that he could get a GED where he was going. Then he asked for a wrench. As Felix turned for it, Harry yanked the Glock out of the waistband of Felix's 501s.

Felix whirled on him. "Gramps, you don't have the guts to use that gun. I still got the knife."

The tense moment was broken by Harry's smiling with hard moral menace. "Right on both counts." He hurled the semi-auto as far as it would go. "But I'm taking a lesson from you. I'm doing my own thing. So I'm not taking orders any more." Harry walked past Felix and called out to the girls that it was time to go.

Felix pulled his hunting knife, sputtering, "Where do you think you're going?"

"LA," Harry told him. "Wanna hang with us?"

Shawnell told Felix that it was over. "C'm'on, quit acting like a jerk. We did our

best."

Not giving up, Felix pointed out that they didn't know where they were. None of the roads they'd been on for the past few hours were on the map, at least he knew that much. So if Harry was such a smart guy, how in hell was he gonna to find LA?!

Harry put a hand on Felix's shoulder and pointed to the sky that was diamond-studded with stars. He showed where the Big Dipper was and traced the line to the North Star. Breathing in the warm air, he softly explained how the constellations make their wheeling march around the North Star and that it doesn't move; the North Star is always where it's supposed to be.

Brandi looked up, a trace of awe in her face.

The dawn sky was pale when Harry drove the station wagon onto the freeway winding down the hills from Lancaster, the Los Angeles Basin spread out below. Brandi was snuggled in sleep against his shoulder; the other two were out cold on the rear seat. The radio said that there wasn't much commuter traffic yet. The news followed: there was none of the kidnapped Idaho man, but the Nevada sporting goods store owner had regained consciousness. He was in critical but stable condition.

The car began sputtering in the middle of the freeway. Harry said, "This is the end of the road."

Brandi murmured, "Why?"

"Because we're out of gas."

Harry coasted toward the shoulder. In the slow lane there was a semi that seemed to heed the warning sign Trucks Use Low Gear. Harry didn't want to lose momentum by braking, so he swerved out to glide past the semi. Just when it decided it wanted the outer lane. Harry slammed on the brakes, waking Felix and Shawnell. The station wagon was rolling fast enough to skid. By the time it was over, the car was partially blocking the number three lane.

Harry and the kids got out and walked to the shoulder. Felix and Shawnell wistfully gazed out at LA, where it was all supposed to have happened but didn't. In less than an hour they were branded as the culprits causing a traffic jam.

A TV station's traffic helicopter was the first to arrive, followed ten minutes later by a patrol car with dudes who looked like they were in a rerun of *CHIPS*. Felix

smiled into the video camera. Man, he was getting his name in lights after all!

As he and the girls were handcuffed, the reporter asked if Mr. Baker was all right. Harry said that he'd get by. She wanted to know how he would testify against his tormentors. Harry answered that he intended to tell it straight: they kidnapped him; then they saved his life. Puzzled, the reporter didn't think Mr. Baker sounded like he had many regrets about what had happened to him.

"Oh, but I do," he said. Harry made sure that he caught Brandi's eye before she ducked into the patrol car. "I wish I was fifty years younger."

She blushed just like a little girl.