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The Other Woman

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Illustration by David Plunkert

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by Jennifer Friedman Lang

It was as if my husband were having an affair — not the lusty, physical kind as much as the deep, emotional connection kind. Unable to hide his admiration, he was gooey-eyed over this girl, ready to follow her wherever she told him to go.

We met her a few summers back on the first day of our road trip from France to Italy. My French husband, Philippe, had never been south of Switzerland, so part of this adventure was shared discovery. With my map in hand, I was ready for mutual exploration.

Seconds into our drive, I heard a voice — warm and womanly, slightly sexy.

“In 300 meters turn right,” she said, interrupting ever so politely. We had rented our Nissan at the airport in Frankfurt, Germany, but this woman was clearly British. “Turn right,” she repeated. Philippe complied.

Within an hour my normally tense husband relaxed his grip on the steering wheel. He leaned back into the squishy leather seat. “She’s great,” he said, pointing at her.

By the day’s end she had guided us to our small resort on Lake Como, Italy.

By the next morning she had become the first thing he thought of upon reaching the car. “Can you program her?” Philippe asked before we were buckled in. I hesitated, not trusting the new technology and not wanting to give up the control seat. “Don’t take it personally,” he said, unaware of my discomfort, “but I’d like her to be my new co-pilot. She was amazing yesterday. And I feel like I can really rely on her.”

Normally moody, I realized there was no purpose in pouting. After all, she wasn’t real. I forced my fingers to push and prod the buttons, wondering if I could change her to him, from a prim and proper Brit to an aggressive New Yorker.

As we drove past fields of blazing yellow sunflowers one afternoon, Philippe turned to me. “What do you think she looks like?”

“Who?” Incredulous wasn’t enough to describe my reaction. He tilted a finger in her direction.

“I don’t know. What about you?”

“I think she’s tall, blonde, blue-eyed, *jolie*,” he said, eyeing me — a short, hazel-eyed brunette — to gauge my reaction.

“Good thing that’s not your type,” I laughed. He smiled. I reached across to massage his thigh.

“Now she can’t do that,” he said with a smirk, squeezing mine.

And somehow I made my peace with Mademoiselle Know-It-All. I even came to rely on her, my map in an unreadable heap at my feet. Indeed, she seemed to know every stretch of road. Then came Florence.

“Continue straight ahead and then bear left,” she said as soon as we entered the city center in search of a parking lot. All we could see were dead ends, detours, construction workers and cranes. As we drove in circles in search of our destination, the woman’s voice stayed steady and strong, almost insistent. When we finally parked, 90 minutes later, I felt a small surge of victory — albeit irrational — as we walked away from the car.

Despite that slip-up, our all-knowing leader guided us out of the city and into the hills of Tuscany that afternoon. Now secure in my knowledge that she wasn’t completely perfect, I, too, began to appreciate having another woman in the car. For once I could enjoy the scenery without intermittent bouts of nausea from map-reading and riding. I found the recipe for road-trip success: enter car, fasten seatbelt, remove sandals, kick up feet on dashboard, apply sunscreen, punch in destination and let her lead the way.

Then, she vanished.

“Where is she?” Philippe asked. Approaching an intersection tentatively, he awaited her instruction. “Why isn’t she telling us where to go?”

“Maybe it’s her day off,” I joked.

“Really, where is she?” he said, leaning over to pick up the map at my feet and hand it to me to unfold.

After determining the right route, we fell into a comfortable silence. Without her interruptions, we could hear the Italian countryside — birds chirping, pedestrians chattering, bicyclists whizzing by — perhaps for the first time. Feeling confident that we could find the road on our own, Philippe leaned over to shut down the navigation system.

Her screen went black. She became nothing more than a distant memory, a tale to tell back home, a private joke. With the map on my lap, I looked at my spouse and smiled.

“Turn right at the end of the road,” I said. I knew Philippe was ready to follow me wherever I told him to go.

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