

Night Drive by Will. F. Jenkins

Madge was all ready and in the act of turning out the living room lights when the telephone rang. She picked it up, and Mr. Tabor identified himself. He sounded as if he had a bad cold. Madge barely knew him, but in a small town people don't stand on ceremony. He said apologetically that his niece Eunice had stopped in town to see him this afternoon, and he'd heard that Madge-he called her Mrs. Haley, of course-was driving over to Colchester tonight. It was an imposition for him to ask, but it would be a great favor if she'd let his niece ride with her.

Madge felt uncomfortable-for Mr. Tabor to mention the Colchester road would make anybody uncomfortable-but she said cordially that she'd be glad to give his niece a lift.

"I was just about to leave, though" she said. "I hope she can be ready fairly soon."

"She's ready now, Mrs. Haley," said Mr. Tabor's muffled voice over the phone. "She'll be waiting for you on the porch. I have to leave, so I'll thank you now, on her behalf."

He hung up, and Madge felt that twinge of uneasiness which comes of being reminded of something one would rather not remember. She turned off the light and went out to the car, feeling queasy. No woman liked to think about Mrs. Tabor before driving a car at night, alone. There was the other girl, too, but it wasn't quite the same thing. Nobody knew who the other girl was, or how it happened. But Madge had known Mrs. Tabor.

The car started briskly and she went two blocks underneath the trees, and one to the right, and there was a lonely looking figure sitting on the steps on Mr. Tabor's already dark house. As Madge pulled in to the curb, the figure picked up a small suitcase and came forward. Madge opened the right-hand door.

"You're Eunice?" she asked cheerfully. "I'm Mrs. Haley."

"It's very good of you," the girl said in a flat voice. "I thought it was a lot for my uncle to ask."

"Nonsense!" said Madge. "I'm glad to have company! Put your bag in the back seat and climb up here with me."

The girl obeyed silently. She was a little angular and a little clumsy. Her hat was severely plain. She wore spectacles that seemed to be tinted, even at night. She sat primly, her hands folded on her lap, as Madge turned and headed out of town.

It was really a beautiful night, with all the nice summery smells that make one glad to be alive, and glad that it's cool and dark. Presently the houses drew back from the road, and street lights ended, and there were fields on either side of the road with dark masses that were woodland beyond them. Madge settled down for the forty-mile run to Colchester. She touched the headlight switch and had bright light for a long way ahead. The road flowed smoothly toward them. But still the thought about Mr. Tabor-Mrs. Tabor, really. She hadn't know them well, but in a small town everybody knows everybody else to speak to, at least, so Mrs. Tabor's death had been especially horrible because she was a bride and Mr. Tabor had been so happy and so proud of her.

"It's nice having someone with me," said Madge. "I really don't like

driving at night. But Sam- my husband, you know- gets into Colchester at ten-ten tonight, and if he waited for a bus he wouldn't get home until after three in the morning. We have terrible bus service!"

The girl was silent for a second, and then said, "Yes." Her voice was flat and low-pitched. Then she seemed to realize that she sounded curt. She added, "It isn't bad in the daytime."

"No," agreed Madge. She was silent for a while and said, "How did Mr. Tabor know I was driving over?"

The girl seemed to consider. Then she said, "I guess somebody mentioned it."

"They'd hardly- "Then Madge stopped. She would never speak of the Colchester road to Mr. Tabor, but some people might. "Oh...I got the gas and oil and tires checked today. I mentioned to Bob- the filling-station attendant- why I was being so finicky. I guess that's the answer."

The girl said, "Probably," and sat quiet, her hands in her lap. The dotted center line of the highway became a solid streak, and the road made a wide curve. Woodland bracketed it- the air was almost chilly among the trees- and abruptly it was clear again. They were maybe four miles on their way.

"Mrs. Haley," said the girl's flat voice, "do you carry a pistol, driving at night?"

Madge jumped a little. Then she laughed, not quite at ease.

"Good heavens, no! Why -"Then she said, "I see. Your uncle thinks women should."

She felt queer. She was going to drive over the highway on which Mrs. Tabor had been killed a year before. There had never been any clue to the killer. It was just assumed that somehow Mrs. Tabor - on her way to meet her husband, too- had been persuaded to stop her car and pick someone up. The car was found, ultimately. It had been sprinkled with gasoline and set on fire, and any clues it might have yielded were destroyed. Mrs. Tabor, herself, had been bludgeoned to death. There were other details, but that was the way the local paper phrased it. And Madge couldn't understand how her husband kept on living in the same town and in the very house to which he'd brought Mrs. Tabor as a bride.

She heard herself saying with morbid interest, "He and Mrs. Tabor hadn't been married long, had they?"

"About three months," said the girl tonelessly. She added in the same expressionless manner, "We're near the turn-off, aren't we?"

"Why, yes," said Madge. She grew confused. One didn't remember Mr. Tabor's niece ever visiting him before, and she'd more or less assumed that she was a complete stranger. As far as that went, Mr. Tabor wasn't a long-time resident himself. He'd come to town a little more than a year ago to accept a rather good position. Three months later he married and brought his bride to a bungalow he'd bought.

Only three months later still, Mrs. Tabor drove on her way to Colchester one night, but never reached her destination. Madge shivered at the thought of what she'd heard about that killing. Her most vivid single memory of Mr. Tabor was the first time she'd seen him after the murder. He was a small man, and he'd looked shrunken and mummylike. But he didn't

leave town. He stayed on, living in the house he'd spent his honeymoon in. Madge couldn't understand his doing that.

The car came to the turn-off. There was nothing conspicuous about it. It was just a secondary road- well-paved enough - that branched off the main highway and wound across-country to Colchester. In thirty-five miles there was one crossroads store and maybe four or five farmhouses which could be seen from the highway. Most of the road's length ran through woodland.

Madge turned into it. Within a quarter of a mile tall and columnar tree trunks engulfed the road. The air was fragrant with the aromatic smell of dropped pine tags and cones. It was cooler, too. But one no longer had the feeling of being in empty open space. Above and ahead there was a narrow ribbon of sky in which stars shone brightly. The headlights stabbed on before and showed the pavement, and pine tree trunks alongside, and more pine tree trunks. There was a bare screen of underbrush at the road's edge.

The angular figure beside Madge said, "Lonely out here, isn't it?"

Madge pressed harder on the accelerator. The car picked up speed.

"One thing's certain," she said, trying to smile, "nobody could make me stop to pick them up on this road!"

"Mrs. Tabor- Aunt Clara, I suppose I should say," said Eunice without emotion "didn't pick people up. But that night she did."

Madge set her lips and drove. Presently she said awkwardly, "I wouldn't as ordinarily, Eunice, but has Mr. Tabor ever gotten any idea of who-er-killed Mrs. Tabor?"

"There's always the chance that the man who did it will be caught." There was a slight pause. "Another girl was killed six months later, you remember," the flat voice impassively.

Madge suddenly regretted deeply that she had not made some excuse to avoid having Mr. Tabor's niece ride with her. It was bad to be reminded of Mrs. Tabor. But to be reminded - and at the same time- of that other battered, half burnt body of an unknown girl made it worse. The girl had surely been murdered somewhere, but nobody knew where, or by whom, or even when. Hunters had found the remains of a huge bonfire deep in the woods. There was a young girl's body in the ashes. The police were never able to find out even so much as her name. All that was known was that she had been dead six weeks or so when her body was found.

"Your uncle," said Madge distastefully, because of the memory, "is staying in town, then, in hope of catching his wife's murderer?"

Eunice's voice said monotonously, "The same man killed that other girl. There was a scorched automobile road map under her body, as if she'd been driving, too. Only the killer got rid of her car. It hasn't ever been found. But it was the same man."

Madge said, shocked, "But that means-"

"The killer is still around," said the flat voice. It hadn't any human quality to it all. "He was even mentioned to the police, by name. But they didn't believe it for an instant. He's too well thought of."

"You-you talk as if you know who the killer is!" protested Madge.

"Of course," the flat voice said almost scornfully.

The car swept past a small clearing, filled now with shoulder high

weeds. The road dived into woods again. Just before the trees re-enveloped the car, there was a sudden sweetness in the air. Honeysuckle. Then the damp, aromatic smell of pine woods once more. Madge was sensitive to scents. Consciously or otherwise, she associated some scent with everyone she knew. All her friends, certainly. Now she suddenly realized one thing that made this girl Eunice seem strange. She did not use scent. Not even a scented soap. But she was hardly a really feminine type, anyhow.

Madge's forehead began to knit into a faint frown, and her heart began to pound oddly as if in anticipation of something that would occur to her presently. She was uneasy.

"If Mrs. Tabor's murderer were caught, I can see that it might be hard to convict him now. My husband's a lawyer, and he says the evidence in such cases has to be airtight because the crime's so horrible."

The detached voice beside her said, "There's no motive for the man to kill that particular woman rather than another. A jury wants to see a motive for a crime. Naturally. Preferably a motive they could feel themselves. Naturally!"

Madge admitted uncomfortably, "My husband said something like that..." She fumbled in the handbag beside her.

"You drive," said the flat voice, "I'll light your cigarette."

Madge felt unreasonably shaky, but she was driving fast. She couldn't take her eyes off the road. She felt one of her own cigarettes touched to her lips. She accepted it. Eunice snapped a lighter. Its tiny flame rose up before Madge's lips. She glanced down. The car wavered. Then the wheel resisted. It was held. Madge felt sheer paralysis numb every muscle in her body.

"I've got the wheel," came tonelessly from beside her.

Madge remembered to puff. The cigarette was lit. The lighter was withdrawn and went off. The wheel was released.

Everything was as before. The car went swiftly between crowded tall tree trunks that rose to where their branches joined to form a roof over all the forest. The sound of the motor echoed back from the wood with a singing note added to it. There was the same clean damp smell of wood mould and pine tags. Everything was exactly as before.

But everything was different. Madge's legs were stiff and icy. Her whole body was cold. Every muscle was tense. Her heart was hammering with an hysterical tempo: beat-beat-beat-beat beat beat ...

Because in that one glance down at the flame as it was held to her cigarette, she had seen Eunice's hand closely and clearly lit. The fingernails were innocent of nail polish. Their ends were not rounded, but square like a man's. The knuckles were like a man's. There were short, black hairs on the back of the hand. Like a man's.

Eunice was a man.

A yammering voice inside Madge's brain chattered hysterically. "You didn't know it was Mr. Tabor on the phone! He talked like he had a cold! It could have been anybody! It wasn't Mr. Tabor at all! It was somebody who wanted to ride with you! He called you and sat on Mr. Tabor's front steps and waited for you! It's the way Mrs. Tabor was killed..."

There was a light by the side of the road ahead. Numbed as she was,

Madge drove on blindly. She saw other lights, which were windows, and dumbly knew that it was the single store between the cut-off and Colchester. But she was a quarter of a mile beyond it when she realized that she could have stopped there. She could have swerved the car and crashed it against something, and people would have run out and she would have been safe. Injured, perhaps, or even killed, but at any rate safe from the man who sat beside her in the appearance of a woman, with tinted spectacles and an unbecoming hat and a flat and toneless voice.

But it was too late now...Before she fully realized her lost opportunity it was gone forever. She went driving on through the night with the muscles of her throat constricted and an icy horror filling all her veins. It was a beautiful night. It was a warm and an odorous and a softly romantic night. The car sped through the darkness, its headlights flaring before it, and now and again a moth fluttered helplessly in their rays, and once there was something feral glittering by the roadside, and as the car sped past it could be seen to be a cat-miles from any house-crouching in the grass at the gravel's edge. It had stared at the approaching car, and its eyes had reflected the headlights.

"Women really ought to carry pistols when they drive at night," said the passionless voice beside her. "But maybe they wouldn't have the nerve to use them."

Madge made an inarticulate sound. Then a desperate cunning came to her. If she could keep him in talk...

"I doubt that I could shoot anyone," she said. Listening to her own voice, she was astounded. It sounded quite human. It was almost convincing. "I couldn't imagine harming a human being."

The uninflected voice said meditatively, "I don't know that the man who killed Mrs. Tabor and that girl would be called human. Possibly he couldn't help it. But-there used to be stories about werewolves."

Madge said quickly, while her tongue tried to cleave to the roof of her mouth,

"Oh, but that's nonsense! People can't turn into wolves!"

"Some people turn into something," said the figure beside her. It spoke without heat. "They aren't insane. I think they're cursed. Once in a year, or once in six months, they feel something stirring inside them. Their eyes change. They grow-bright and restless and terribly intent. The accursed ones feel a horrible unspeakable tension inside. They're obsessed. And they have to kill".

Madge expected to hear herself scream. But her voice said brightly while she felt horror unspeakable, "Then the psychiatrists ought to watch out for bright-eyed people, don't you think?"

"Ah, but they're cunning!" said the figure softly. "They don't let anybody notice their eyes!" The head with its unbecoming woman's hat turned, in the dim light from the instrument-board. The tinted spectacles which were like sunglasses-worn at night!-regarded Madge with a monstrous unhumanness. She could not see the eyes behind them. There was the plain, angular outline of a face, and merely the seeming of two holes for eyes. "You see," said the voice confidentially, "I've studied them. I wanted to understand. And it seems that there have always been such people. In olden days they killed like wolves, and wolves were blamed, but no wolves

were ever as clever as they were! So the story of the werewolf began—of a person who got into a house in human form and then turned into a wild beast to kill and rend and tear his victim. It was wonderfully clever of the people who killed, to start that story!”

The figure in the seat beside Madge seemed mirthlessly amused. “They started, too, the tradition that werewolves couldn’t face garlic, and that they could only be killed by silver bullets. Those legends were very useful to the accursed people... Now they help spread the story that such killers only need to be treated by psychiatrists to be cured, and that they’re really to be pitied. ... That’s useful to them, too.”

“I—but I can’t believe—“ then Madge’s throat clicked and she could not speak at all.

The person beside her sat quite still. The hands were folded primly. Somehow it was more horrible that the figure sat quiescent, awaiting its own time, than any snarled menaces would have been. Madge’s hands and arms were stiff. They did not tremble, because they were paralyzed. But the wheel did not waver. Automatically, her body moved to keep the car in the road.

“I suppose they’re frightened after they have killed,” said the figure reflectively. “They would be. But they learn cunning. They never live in one place very long. They kill once or twice, or maybe three times, and then they move away. But they’re very nice people, and their friends are sorry to see them go. They go to church, and they act like everybody else. But they never dare get too prosperous. When you’re prosperous you can’t move on easily. It would be a temptation to stay on and kill—maybe a fourth or fifth time. That wouldn’t be wise! Oh, they’re cunning! They have to be. Because they’re cursed.”

The wood broke away from one side of the road. Far, far away, a single unwinking dot of light told of an isolated farmhouse, far from any neighbors. Then the trees closed in once more, and Madge knew that from here to the very outskirts of Colchester there would be no other light. She heard her voice say brightly, “Oh, but let’s talk of something else! Why choose such a gruesome subject, Eunice?”

“Mrs. Tabor was killed somewhere along here,” said the voice, softly.

Then Madge’s hands began to shake. It was not a mere trembling, but an uncontrollable shake. The road was very straight, here, and a long way ahead there was a light. She pressed on the accelerator and found herself offering an agonized prayer that the man beside her in a woman’s dress wouldn’t notice until she had caught up with it. And then she would scream and swerve in front of it and brake...

But the toneless voice said, “You had your car checked today, Mrs. Haley. You mentioned at the filling station that it was because you would be driving to meet your husband on the ten-ten train in Colchester. That wasn’t discreet. People still talk about Mrs. Tabor’s murder. The filling station boy mentioned that you’d be driving the same way tonight — the same way she did. If the killer heard about it. . . .”

Madge tried hysterically to keep him talking until she caught up with whatever was ahead. . . .

“Oh, but I’m sure no one would think—“

“Someone would,” murmured the figure with the tinted spectacles that

hid its eyes to make it unrecognizable. "Somebody who was obsessed, who was accursed, who felt a horrible unbearable tension inside. Someone who knew the time had come when he had to kill."

"Why –" said Madge brightly, and gasped for breath between every word, "why – you speak – as if someone – planned to kill me!"

"I wouldn't be surprised. I wouldn't be surprised at all," the figure beside her said softly. Then the voice changed. "There's something on the road ahead."

Madge made a sound which by no possibility could be considered a word. It was merely a noise formed by her throat and lips.

"It looks like an accident," said the figure beside her, tensely. "If someone's hurt –"

The light was not moving. She overhauled it swiftly. She knew she was ashen white now and that her throat was dry, but if she could only get to where someone else was, no matter who . . . Then she knew not only what was in the road ahead, but who. It was the red motorcycle on which the young man, Bob, at the filling station dashed madly about the countryside during his time off. It lay on the road, its lights still shining brightly slanting across the road. There was Bob, limping out into the bright glare and spreading out his arms in a plea for the car to stop. There was an improvised bandage on one leg.

"I've – got to stop," Madge said, choking. "I know him! It's Bob at the filling station. He checked my car today."

The figure beside her seemed to relax. A crazy, frantic hope came to Madge. The masquerading man must be armed. But he would hesitate to try to kill two people – a man and a woman together – where a woman alone would be a certain victim. Maybe – maybe if she could get Bob into the car, the figure that pretended to be Eunice might sit quietly, and get out of the car in Colchester, and nothing would happen at all. . . .

The brakes squealed shrilly. The car stopped. There was some spilled gasoline on the road. There was Bob, limping – almost hopping – in the headlight rays. He came to the window beside Madge.

"Mrs. Haley!" he said, relieved. "I was hoping you'd be coming along behind me, instead of having gone on ahead. I hit something in the road and skidded, and my leg's all messed up –"

He stopped. He'd seen that Madge was not alone. She said unsteadily, "Bob, this is – Eunice. She's Mr. Tabor's niece. She's riding to Colchester with me."

"Oh," said Bob.

"Get in the back seat," said Madge feverishly. "You'll want a doctor. I'll rush you over to Colchester."

Bob hesitated. Then he said, "I don't know. . . . I hate to leave my motorcycle. There's nothing really the matter with it. All I need is somebody to help me stand it up. With one bum leg I can't do it, but I don't need much help. It's not too heavy –"

The soft, emotionless voice beside Madge said, "I'll help. I've got a pair of work gloves in my suitcase. I'll get them out and help, if you'll pull up a little so you won't block the road, Mrs. Haley."

Madge was wrenched by agonizing hope. She pulled ahead and over to the side of the road.

The figure in the car said softly, "A little farther. . . . Don't stop the motor, Mrs. Haley. . . ."

Then the right -hand door was open. The angular figure was getting out. It opened the back door and pulled out the small suitcase. Bob went hopping back to his motorcycle to wait.

And then the figure of Eunice - which was not Eunice - said with an extraordinary hushed passion, "Mrs. Haley. . . . I'm not a woman. I'm John Tabor. My wife was killed near here by someone she knew. She'd had her car checked that day at the filling station, being worried about driving alone at night."

Madge gasped, and tried to speak, and could not.

"I watched everybody's eyes," said the figure very, very, softly. "I picked him out because I saw his eyes glowing six months ago. But nothing happened. But - then they found that other girl's body. Then I knew I was right. He's very happy now. He knew you were coming. He said so. And you'd have stopped for him. My wife did."

Madge's throat made a bubbling sound.

"Oh, but he's happy!" said the small figure softly. "He thinks I'm a girl. I'll start back. Then he'll call to you to stop your motor and help. He's quite sure he'll have both victims tonight."

The person who was not Eunice turned away.

"But - what shall I do?" Madge gasped.

"Just drive on," said John Tabor in a gentle voice. "That's all. Just drive on. He killed my wife. He's going to try to kill me - thinking I'm a woman. I think he's going to be surprised."

The small, angular figure went back through the night, along the highway's edge. The car idled softly. Katydid shrilled stridently in the dark. There were faint rustling sounds which were tree branches moving in the night wind. Everything was utterly peaceful. But Madge cringed in her seat at the wheel of the idling car. Little choked sounds came from her throat with every breath. John Tabor went back - clicking absurd high heels on the roadway - to kill Bob, of the filling station. Or perhaps Bob waited to kill him, waited with glowing, feral eyes to commit the unspeakable. If she - Madge - did not scream to warn Bob, there would be murder done. But if she did scream, there would be John Tabor killed instead, and Bob could overtake the car on his motorcycle and he could force her off the road and -

There was no light except the narrow straight ribbon of stars overhead and the slanting skewed patch of road and tree trunks which was lighted by the motorcycle's headlight. Bob wasn't in that beam. But he was silhouetted against the lighted space. He watched the small, skirted figure as it approached him. And as Madge looked, whimpering senselessly, Bob seemed to change.

He was a black shape against a lighted background. And the shape changed - very gradually and very terribly - from that of a tall and well-made young man favoring an injured leg, to a crouched horror which was wholly animal and an embodiment of blood-lust. The outlines of humanity remained, but one of the arms moved slowly, and it came back into silhouette holding something drawn from a hiding place. It was a bludgeon, a club, a thing with which to batter in lustful frenzy at a body helpless

to resist any longer. The hand held it, swayed it gently back and forth, making ready. . . .

Then a voice came. But the voice was wholly human, and humorously appealing, and productive of stark hysteria because it told of cunning past all madness.

“Mrs. Haley,” called the voice cheerfully, “if you’ll turn off your motor and come help too, it won’t be any job at all to get the bike up and going!”

Madge’s heart stopped beating. The crouched figure moved toward the blob of light print dress which was Eunice – but which was not Eunice. The crouched figure moved with a swift, rolling, ape-like gait toward the angular small figure that Bob from the filling station thought was a girl. And it did not limp; the injured leg was a trick, too!

Then there was a sound in the darkness.

Madge let in the clutch. It was her body that did it, taking charge while her mind screamed soundlessly. It was her body which drove with an insane skill and speed away from that place. She never remembered driving the ten miles to Colchester. Her mind was gibbering that this was the way Mrs. Tabor had been killed. She’d stopped at the filling station – as Madge had done – to check her car for the night drive. She’d chatted with Bob – as Madge had done – and told him why. And Bob had been respectful and friendly – as with Madge – and did not let her see his eyes. The unknown girl too had been driving through. She’d stopped for gasoline, no doubt. Maybe she’d asked about the roads. And Bob had been respectful and friendly and helpful – keeping his eyes averted. . . .

And ever since then Mr. Tabor had been watching the eyes of all the people in the town, and he’d seen that horrible glitter only once, but Bob had been too cunning for him, and he wasn’t sure he was right until the body of the unknown girl was found, weeks later. And then there was nothing for the police to go on. Mr. Tabor’s talk of glittering eyes wasn’t enough even to justify an investigation. It wasn’t anything at all. . . . So Mr. Tabor could only wait patiently for that glitter to come into Bob’s eyes again, and then find out what woman would be driving alone, and drive with her. He even had to pretend to be a girl, or Bob would have been too cunning to attempt any crime. . . .

Madge drove like a madwoman until the lights of Colchester showed through the trees. Then her body slowed the car, and took it sedately into Colchester, and even stopped at the town’s one red traffic light, and parked it with trembling precision by the railroad station where her husband would presently descend. Then she sat still, shaking. She couldn’t speak. She couldn’t tell anyone. . . .

But she clung hysterically to her husband when he arrived. He drove back home the long way – she wouldn’t go through the cut-off – concerned over the terror she couldn’t attempt to explain. She wasn’t able to tell him until the next day. Then she wept horribly.

He went out. An hour later he came back, very white.

“Bob isn’t back at the filling station,” he said sternly. “He told his boss last night he was leaving. Mr. Tabor is at his desk in the mill. Nothing’s happened. Nothing! Understand?”

And that was one time that Madge obeyed her husband. She stayed

indoors for days, shivering. The first time she went out, she saw Mr. Tabor on the street. He lifted his hat politely. She nodded distantly and hurried on.

He moved to another town shortly after that.