

RICHARD LANGE

Long Distance

Mrs. Rangle was watching television in her small living room when she heard voices out in front of her mobile home. It was dark out but when she parted the curtains she saw, in the yellowish light coming across the lane from the porch of the recreation room, the long mane of wavy hair, the baggy jeans and light-colored T-shirt of her neighbor, Lois. Lois had a man with her. He was shorter, with a head of white hair, and a white or perhaps light-blue suit. Something was wrapped around his neck. Lois was in her late sixties, more than a decade older than Mrs. Rangle, but she still worked in her garden every day and often took walks downtown for no other reason than to sit in a café and enjoy a cup of coffee. Mrs. Rangle, by contrast, kept her walks to the safe confines of the mobile home park; if she went downtown for any reason she drove. When Lois and the man went through the chain-link gate and reached Lois's porch, triggering the motion-detecting porchlight, Mrs. Rangle saw that the thing around the man's neck was an ascot.

"It's not much of a place," Lois said, putting her key into the lock of her front door. The spaces in the park were small, with only eight feet between each trailer, so eavesdropping was easy.

"Oh, I'll bet it's lovely," the man said. He had an accent: Scottish or Irish. And he was carrying a canvas bag that appeared to have something heavy in it.

Lois let him go in ahead of her. She turned and looked out at the empty lane in front and then looked in Mrs. Rangle's direction. Mrs. Rangle immediately pulled the curtains closed.

Who could this man be? In the two years that Mrs. Rangle had lived here, Lois hadn't had any visitors except her children or other park members. Mrs. Rangle was sure of this. Lois was a widow, and she had no boyfriend. Now suddenly a man in an ascot? Mrs. Rangle strained to hear. The large windows of Lois's trailer were closed, but the louvered windows above them were open, so the sound came in fits and starts.

"Well, it's not the only thing that gets better with age, is it?" the man asked.

Lois said something inaudible. Moments later there was a pop, then a series of muffled sounds, scrapes of chairs on the linoleum floor.

Lois said something else that Mrs. Rangle couldn't quite make out.

"Go ahead. Eat, drink. Live it up. Who knows when the dog catchers will be here," the man said.

"It still doesn't seem fair. I mean, is it even legal?"

"It was the gambling, really. If it wasn't for that I think they'd leave me alone. But there's an inheritance at stake, you see. Greedy bastards."

A jazz number came on and the conversation became too muffled to make out.

Mrs. Rangle picked up the telephone and dialed her daughter, Marlene.

Marlene lived 350 miles to the south, in Los Angeles, and Mrs. Rangle only saw her for a week each summer when she came up with her children, Erin and Tyler, ages 5 and 7, and stayed in a motel down near the beach. Mrs. Rangle had another daughter as well, Michelle, but she was estranged. Mrs. Rangle hadn't had any contact with her in ten years. All she really knew was that Michelle lived in New York City, worked for a book publisher, and had been divorced twice. She was 33 now, single again following the last divorce, but Mrs. Rangle still pictured her as a young girl.

Mrs. Rangle heard her daughter's voice and started speaking, but then realized it was only the answering machine. "Marlene, something is going on," she said. "A man is inside Lois's trailer. It's nearly ten at night. I've never seen him before and I'm worried about her. Please call back. I think she's being taken advantage of."

When Mrs. Rangle replaced the phone on the cradle, she wondered, as she often did when leaving a message on Marlene's machine, if Marlene was at home listening. It was a Sunday night, and the children would have school in the morning. Where else would they be?

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When Mrs. Rangle was twenty-three and living in Glendale, she took Michelle to Griffith Park. It was a cold, cloudy day in the fall, and some paving work was being done on the road leading into the area around the merry-go-round, forcing Mrs. Rangle to park a few hundred yards away and walk. They cut through an area of sparse pine trees, Michelle, who was two years old then, stopping every so often to pick up sticks and rocks, or to point to gopher holes and say "Snake."

"No, not snakes. Gophers," Mrs. Rangle said. "I think, anyway."

When they emerged from the forested area they saw that the merry-go-round was closed. Several of the horses and unicorns had been unbolted and laid on the ground, allowing wider access to the guts of the contraption, where a Hispanic man was crouched, working a wrench while a Spanish-language station played from a radio on the metal platform. An older couple was seated on a bench nearby, the man in a navy sportscoat and dress shirt, the woman in pearl slacks and a white sweater, but otherwise the area looked abandoned. "It's closed, sweetie," Mrs. Rangle said.

Michelle was studying a foil gum wrapper she'd picked up along the way, but now she saw what her mother was seeing and a confused look crossed her face.

"We'll have to come back another time."

Michelle had been on the merry-go-round before, but she seemed not to remember it. She held up the wrapper and said, "Gum!"

"No, put that down. That's trash. Let's go. We'll go to the swings at the little park." A chill wind had come on, and Mrs. Rangle reached down to zip up Michelle's sweater.

As they were crossing back through the forested area toward the car, Mrs. Rangle noticed a bearded man in an army jacket, his hair wild and tangled, walking toward them. He was about ten yards away, moving quickly, as though there were

someone back toward the merry-go-round he was trying to catch up with, but when Mrs. Rangle looked at the man's face, his wide, intense eyes, it was clear he had his sights on her and no one else. She stopped, reflexively reached down for her daughter's hand. She was just touching Michelle's soft fingers, half her attention on her daughter and half on the man, when he slammed into her. She was lifted up off the ground and carried, toes dragging across the carpet of pine needles and oak leaves. The man had a strong hand at her throat, so her scream was just a gurgle, and she could not breathe. The dusky air became suddenly clearer, as though she'd put on a pair of eyeglasses, and her panic took on a better focus as well. Michelle. The only reason to get loose from this man's angry, smelly clench, was to get back to Michelle before something happened to her, before she wandered into the road they'd been about to reach. Even when the man pushed Mrs. Rangle through a wall of twiggy shrubs and slammed her to the dirt, her thoughts were only of getting back to Michelle. The man released her throat momentarily and she screamed Michelle's name, but the voice lacked its normal volume and tone. It sounded like an audio cassette that had jammed in the player, the tape being wound tighter and tighter by the turning gears.

"Screamer! Screamer!" the man growled, clapping Mrs. Rangle's mouth.

His other hand came brutally under her skirt and ripped her underwear down, and then he was climbing onto her, seemingly trying to hide her under himself. His penis moved against her, shoved, tore at her, but she had disassociated herself from what was happening down there. Her eyes were on the space—the few inches—between the ground and the lowest leaves of the shrubs, through which she could see the area where she and Michelle had been walking. The trees were sparse outside of this cluster of shrubs, but she could not see Michelle—or anyone else. She clawed awkwardly at the dirt, trying, like an overturned turtle, to right herself, but the beery, meat-breathed man kept slamming her down again.

And then he was up and hurrying away. Her feet finally found purchase and she was able to break back through the tangle of shrubs and run. When she saw Michelle sitting in the dirt, tears and snot coating her face, howling in terror, the wave of relief was so strong she stumbled. She caught herself and scooped Michelle into her arms and held her, shooshed her, carrying her, quickly, toward the car.

She was just reaching the road when she heard a man calling after her. "Miss! Miss!" the man said. She glanced back to see the older man from the bench, his white hair up in the wind. "Are you okay?" he asked. He was following her with his hand up in a calming gesture.

Mrs. Rangle crossed the road, climbed into the car and pulled the door closed behind her, slamming the lock. Michelle was screaming in her face, but Mrs. Rangle managed to find the zippered pocket at the hip of her skirt and extract her keys.

The man had both hands up now, urging Mrs. Rangle to slow down, to get out of the car again. He himself looked afraid, eyes wide under thick gray bangs. Mrs. Rangle, still clutching Michelle in one arm, her free hand trembling like an electric knife, found the ignition and started the car.

“Please, Miss,” the man pleaded. He stepped backward a few feet. “We’ve got the police coming.”

Mrs. Rangle wheeled the car away from the curb and punched the gas.

When she reached the carport of her apartment complex, her husband was just getting out of his car, the dark-blue shirt he wore to his job at Wheeler’s Auto Body rolled at the sleeves, his hands stained black. He was smiling, keeping himself in tight next to his door to allow her room to park, and then a cloud of recognition changed him. He sprang around to his wife’s side of the car, his face white and panicked.

“Tom,” she sobbed. “Tom.”

“What? Jesus!”

Michelle was still crying, but it was no longer the soul-rending howl from earlier. Tom tried to take her from his wife’s arms but Mrs. Rangle would not let go of her.

Even later, when the police arrived, when they were trying to extract from Mrs. Rangle a workable description of the attacker, she kept Michelle in her lap, kept stroking her hair, kissing her soft cheeks and ears. Michelle had stopped crying completely by now. Her face had been wiped and her expression was one of awed curiosity, her gaze fixed on these strangers with shiny things on their shirts and gleaming silver badges on their caps. She began to fuss, to push against Mrs. Rangle’s face and sore neck. But still Mrs. Rangle would not let go of her.

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“Hello, Lois,” Mrs. Rangle said, stepping out onto her porch.

Lois was in her garden, sitting in a metal deck chair just inside her chain-link fence. She was drinking a cup of tea, a folded magazine in her hand, her long hair flowing back over the chair.

“I thought I heard someone in your trailer last night.”

“Hi, Mrs. Rangle.”

Mrs. Rangle paused a moment, waiting. “Did you have a visitor?”

“No, Mrs. Rangle.”

“Are you sure? I distinctly heard voices.”

“It was probably the television, Mrs. Rangle. Maybe it was your own television.”

Lois often spoke to Mrs. Rangle in this flat, disinterested tone; it frustrated Mrs. Rangle to no end. But now that it was clear Lois was not being honest, that she could use this tone even when telling a bold lie, Mrs. Rangle wondered what other lies Lois had told very casually. Mrs. Rangle heard someone moving around in the back of Lois’s trailer and realized the visitor was still here.

“All right,” Mrs. Rangle said. “Have a nice day.” She stepped back into her unit and closed the door. *So he spent the night! Where had she met him? Why was she letting a man she barely knew stay the night? Was he preying on her? Stealing from her? Who was he?*

Mrs. Rangle took her seat by the side window and settled in to watch—the

man would have to come out eventually. Before he could though, Lois carried her magazine back inside and the door stayed closed for half an hour. There was movement and some muffled words, but Mrs. Rangle could hear nothing distinct. Then Lois and the man emerged. The man was dressed in a seersucker suit and he had the ascot on again; it was cream-colored. His thick silver hair was combed into a perfect wave. They climbed into Lois's truck and drove off.

Two days later, when Lois's truck was not parked out front, the man returned. He walked quickly through the gate and let himself into the trailer. I knew it, Lois thought. *A criminal!* She picked up the telephone and dialed 911.

"911 Emergency Response. What are you reporting?"

"A man has come into my neighbor's trailer," Mrs. Rangle whispered. "He's in there right now."

"Do you recognize the man?"

"No. He's wearing an ascot."

"An ascot?"

"He's a foreigner. He's stealing from her."

"So you think he's burglarizing the home?"

"Yes."

"I have 418 North Coast Avenue. Is that correct?"

"Yes. Space 44. Please hurry."

"We'll send someone out. Please hold."

The line went quiet and Mrs. Rangle became aware of the tension in her body, the sweat on her lips and brow. Her throat was dry.

The dispatcher came back on the line. "Can you describe the man?"

"Yes. White hair. Blue suit. About sixty."

"Sixty or sixteen?"

"Sixty. Six zero."

"Okay. Um, you say he's wearing an ascot?"

"Yes!"

"Okay. An officer is on the way."

Mrs. Rangle hung up and then pushed the curtain aside again, her heart pounding. She mentally pleaded for the police to arrive but she could hear no siren growing louder in the distance. Three minutes went by, then five, the whole time Mrs. Rangle fearful that the man would come out of the trailer and get away. Finally, a police car that didn't even have its lights on turned up the lane and stopped in front of Lois's trailer. A young, handsome officer with a crewcut emerged cautiously from the car and went through the gate. "Santa Cruz Police Department," he said, rapping at the door. "Open up."

"Coming," the man called from inside.

The front door opened and the thief poked his head out. "Yes?"

"Sir, can you step outside?"

"Sure, laddy. But don't shoot." The thief smiled but the young officer was not

amused.

“Do you live here?”

“No, no. Just visiting.”

“Are you a friend of the owner’s?”

“An acquaintance, really. May I ask what’s the trouble?”

“We had a burglary call for this address.”

The thief chuckled. “Well, sorry to disappoint. Been many things in life. Was even a smuggler in my youth. The war was on, you should know. But there’s no burglary on my c.v. as of yet.”

“Do you have some identification?”

“Um, well.” The thief appeared to be looking for an escape route.

“Sir, some identification please.”

“Ohhh,” the man said, dramatically. “Yes. Yes, I do.” He reached for his wallet.

Mrs. Rangle stayed at her window, watching the man being placed in the back of the patrol car, and listening intently when Lois finally arrived home and had to answer the officer’s questions. When the officer came up Mrs. Rangle’s porch steps and knocked on her door, she knew everything he might tell her, but she put on a face of concerned confusion.

“Good day, ma’am.” Up close she could see the officer was a bit swarthy, perhaps Mexican or Italian. “Did you make the call to 911?”

“Yes. I was very concerned.”

“Well, the man wasn’t a burglar, you’ll be happy to know. But he was listed as a Missing Person. He disappeared from his daughter’s home in San Mateo a couple days ago and apparently took a bus down here. He’d talked your neighbor into letting him stay. But everything is all right now. His daughter is on her way to pick him up.”

“Thank you for telling me. I knew there was something wrong over there.”

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When Mrs. Rangle was thirty-six, she was waiting by the phone, watching the street in front of her house for any sign of Michelle. Michelle hadn’t come directly home after school, as was the rule, and Mrs. Rangle was sick with fear.

A few months after the rape, Mrs. Rangle and her husband had moved north to Santa Cruz. They’d lived in a small apartment not far from the beach in the Live Oak neighborhood for the first two years, Tom working at Santa Cruz Imported Truck Service and Mrs. Rangle working at Michelle’s school as a teacher’s aide. When Mrs. Rangle became pregnant again, Tom borrowed money from his uncle for a down payment on a small two bedroom house on the west side of town. It had been hoped by Tom and by the counselor that Mrs. Rangle saw monthly that the pregnancy would be good for her. She had not been able to calm herself since the rape, and she’d developed some separation issues in regards to Michelle. Just allowing Michelle to play at the houses of her friends, or to attend the birthday parties of her classmates without going with her, caused Mrs. Rangle to have anxiety attacks, to pace the house with her

hand at her throat. But bringing another child into the family hadn't worked. Tom was gone now, moved over the hill to San Jose and engaged to another woman, and the two-bedroom house was up for sale.

Mrs. Rangle got into her car and started driving around, her eyes swinging from side to side, checking over every group of teenagers she passed. She tried the streets around the high school and then got out of the car and walked the campus, stopping some football players coming up the hill from the field to ask about Michelle. But these boys, sweaty, wild-haired, scraping the asphalt with their cleats, said they didn't even know her. Mrs. Rangle raced home again to see if a message had been left on the machine or, God willing, Michelle was actually there, but when she burst through the door into the kitchen, she saw only Marlene, just home from rehearsing for the Christmas pageant at the elementary school, sitting at the kitchen table with a bag of cookies and a glass of milk.

"Where would she go?" Mrs. Rangle asked.

"Mom, I don't know. Just calm down. I'm sure she's all right."

"No. We need to find her. I want you to stay here and wait by the phone. If she calls tell her to come home *immediately*."

Mrs. Rangle went back out again, driving the streets frantically, zig-zagging her way over every possible route between the high school and the house. She went downtown and cruised Pacific Avenue, checking the benches and the tables in front of the cafés. She was making a wider search, marking off the grid of downtown streets, when she saw Michelle on the lawn in front of the Calvary church. Michelle was with a boy and another girl, her friend April, their backpacks and books strewn all around them.

Mrs. Rangle stopped the car in the middle of the street and ran to Michelle. "Why aren't you home?" she pleaded.

Michelle and her friends looked up in fright. The boy, wearing glasses, his hair in a gelled wave that spiked at the top, turned bright red. April hunched her shoulders and sank into herself.

"Please get in the car, Michelle," Mrs. Rangle demanded.

But Michelle was stone-faced. She glared at her mother.

"Michelle, please. It's nearly six o'clock."

Michelle kept her expression firm. When Mrs. Rangle reached down to grab her hand, Michelle held it in tight against her breast. Her face had turned red too now, but she still hadn't said a word.

"Please," Mrs. Rangle said. "Please."

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"Marlene, please, please answer. Something incredible has happened. Lois was duped by a con man. She took him into her home and nearly...."

A click and then a screech sounded through the line. "Mother, what are you talking about?"

"You are home."

“Yes, I’m here. I just came in. What’s happening up there?”

“Oh, Marlene, you wouldn’t believe it. A man escaped from his daughter’s home and came to Santa Cruz and talked Lois into letting him stay in her trailer. The police had been looking for the man for days.”

“What had he done?”

“I don’t know. Lois met him somewhere downtown. He sweet-talked her and she let him come home with her. Two days later he came back alone and I called the police.”

“Are you sure about this, mother?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, are you sure this is what happened?”

“Of course I’m sure. Marlene, the police were here for an hour. They left not ten minutes ago.”

“Okay, well, as long as you’re okay.”

“Oh, I’m fine. I’m a hero.”

Marlene said nothing for a moment. “Mother, maybe it would be better if you left Lois alone. Let her deal with her own problems. You don’t have to get involved.”

“Marlene, she’s too trusting. She let a *stranger* stay the *night*. He could have been anyone.”

“Okay. You’re right. Maybe she should have been a little less trusting. But don’t worry about her too much, all right?”

“We have to watch out for each other, Marlene. If we don’t, who will?”

“You’re right. Is everything else okay?”

“Marlene?”

“Yes, mother?”

“Please tell Michelle what I did. Make her understand how good I was.”

“Mother, Michelle doesn’t want to know. She has her own life to worry about.”

“When will she come back, Marlene?”

“I don’t know, mother. When she’s not angry anymore.”

“It’s been so long. How can she be angry for ten years?”

“Michelle is a strange person. I can’t get through to her either.”

“Was I ever so bad as she says?”

“Mother, I’ve got dinner in the oven. I need to go, all right?”

“You’re eating early.”

“Yes, we’re eating early. Erin has a school function this evening.”

“Oh, what is it?”

“I can’t remember right now. I’ve got to go.”

“Please tell her, Marlene. Tell her I still love her.”

“Mother, I’ve got to go.”

Mrs. Rangle was just finishing her morning bowl of oat bran when she saw Lois emerge from her trailer wearing a large straw hat. Mrs. Rangle stepped quickly over to the door and opened it. “Are you all right, Lois?”

“Go back inside, Mrs. Rangle,” Lois said sharply.

“Did they take him back home? His children, I mean?”

“Mrs. Rangle, why did you call the police?”

“He was breaking into your home.”

“No he wasn’t. I gave him a key. I’m entitled to have a guest in my home, Mrs. Rangle. I’m entitled to my privacy.”

“But you didn’t know him. You didn’t know what he could have done to you.”

“Mrs. Rangle, go back inside and leave me alone.”

“I was only trying to help you, Lois. I would want a neighbor to do the same for me.”

“Just stay out of my business. Haven’t you learned your lesson by now?”

“What lesson?”

“Never mind, Mrs. Rangle. Just worry about your daughter and don’t bother me.”

This reference to her daughter knocked Mrs. Rangle back on her heels. A chill wind moved through her and she felt light-headed. She closed the door and sat in the chair beneath the window. Lois always acted as though she just wanted to be left alone, but here she’d been eavesdropping the whole time. But knowing this about Lois, knowing that she wasn’t as aloof as she acted, was cold comfort. Lois had thrown a dagger and hit Mrs. Rangle right in the heart.

Over the next few days Mrs. Rangle watched Lois even more carefully. Lois was back to her usual routine, coming and going from her trailer alone, carrying her magazine to the cafés downtown, watering her lavender and her four o’clocks. Some neighbors stopped to talk with her occasionally, but the conversations were either about mundane things like the weather, or they were whispered. No matter how hard she strained, Mrs. Rangle couldn’t make them out.

As Mrs. Rangle sat at the window, watching, she feared that Lois would see her there and say some new hurtful thing, but Lois didn’t even turn her head in Mrs. Rangle’s direction. That was the most maddening part of it all, that Lois could go on with her routine as though she hadn’t shouted that insult, as though the pain she’d caused wasn’t worth an apology, not even an acknowledgement.

Two weeks after the day the police arrived, Mrs. Rangle woke in the night to some strange sounds. She stood from her bed and quietly slid the window open. The clarity of the sounds improved, but they were still muffled. Lois’s porchlight was on, which meant someone had come through the door in the last five minutes—the motion-sensor turned it off unless there was more movement—and in the light bleeding back along the side of the trailer, she saw that Lois’s louvered windows had been shut. Though she couldn’t make out any particular words, it was clear Lois had a man with her. Mrs. Rangle heard a peal of laughter. It sounded familiar. The man with the ascot had come back.

The telephone was in the kitchen, just a few feet away. It seemed important to call. The man’s children would be worried sick. It wouldn’t be right to let them go on sitting alone somewhere, wondering. With her toes, she located her slippers under the

bed and worked her feet into them. She heard Lois squeal. It was a sharp cry, as though in fright. Mrs. Rangle went back to the window and kept herself motionless, her muscles taut, her breathing bated. Lois squealed again. And now there was a knocking sound, something having fallen to the floor in there. More knocks followed. They were desultory at first, then they became rhythmic. Lois squealed again and then moaned. Mrs. Rangle ran for the phone and picked it up. The dial tone buzzed in her ear. "Oh, Christopher," Lois called out. "Oh, my!"

Mrs. Rangle held her finger over the buttons. Tears were filling her eyes. The hand that held the phone trembled. She heard another cry, but this one was her own. She clutched her nightgown at the throat, but another cry came, then another. She hung up the phone.

The End