

# Afterward

Grant Wood.  
*Death on the Ridge  
Road*, 1935.  
Oil on masonite,  
39 x 46 in. Williams  
College Museum of Art.  
Gift of Cole Porter.

ANN CLUNG TO THE HILLSIDE GAZING DOWN on the mangled wreck of her car. She stumbled to her feet and did a quick body check; no blood, no pain, everything moved correctly. A gust of wind whipped over the hill, blowing her hair across her face. Brushing it away, she tried to figure out what happened. Nothing. Her last clear thought was of the new knitting pattern she'd bought earlier that day. Frowning, she ran her hands through her hair. No bumps on her head, so why couldn't she remember?

"What a wreck."

Ann flinched at the voice just behind her left ear. She hadn't seen anyone approach.

"That car is totaled."

She turned to face the speaker and saw . . . Steve McQueen? Trying to get a grip on her scattered thoughts, Ann nodded.

"What was it, a Volvo?"

"Yes." Relieved that her vocal chords still worked, Ann looked closely at her companion. Male, in his late forties, sandy hair, craggy face, his resemblance to the actor was growing, not fading.

"Those cars usually have good crash test ratings. It must have been a hell of a smash up to turn it into a pretzel like that."

Ann shook her head. "I don't remember."

The man shrugged. "Just as well."

They stood silently contemplating the wreck below. Gradually, the oddity of the situation occurred to Ann. The man standing beside her hadn't asked if she was all right, hadn't offered to call for help, and hadn't explained where he'd come from.

"I'm Ann," she said, trying to inject a trace of normality.

He nodded his head once in her direction. "Steve."

Ann opened her mouth to say *just like the actor* but closed it before any words escaped. It seemed very strange that no emergency vehicles were at the scene yet. Her town prided itself on its quick response team. "I don't hear any sirens."

"Me neither," Steve said.

"Shouldn't we call someone?"

"They know. They'll be here soon enough."

Ann fell silent, lulled by the quiet on the hillside. The only sound was the wind, blowing through the grass at their feet. Looking at the car below, Ann realized what was odd about the scene. Maxwell Road, where her car sat in a crumpled heap, was a busy road with constant traffic. Since finding herself on this hillside, Ann hadn't seen a single car go by. "Where are all the cars?"

"They're being held back until everything is cleared up here."

That made sense. Roadblocks must be out to keep the street clear for emergency vehicles. They probably detoured everyone over to Hopewell Road. Ann could imagine the traffic snarl that would cause. She glanced over at her companion. Was he one of the emergency crew? He wasn't wearing any sort of uniform. Maybe he was a volunteer fireman in a first responder position.

"Are you with the fire department?"

His mouth quirked into a half smile. "No."

Ann waited for him to continue and tell her what he actually did do. When it became obvious he wasn't going to say any more, she started to wonder about him. Was he one of those weird accident chasers who took ghoulish pleasure in car wrecks? She snuck a quick glance at him. He seemed calm and unruffled. Where had he come from and how had he gotten here?

"Do you live nearby?"

"No, not really."

"I don't see your car anywhere."

"I didn't come by car," he said, turning to look fully into her face. Ann paused to let him fill in the rest of the sentence, but he merely looked at her.

Apparently, he was going to make her play twenty questions. Ann pursed her lips. She didn't have time for this kind of game. She had

to get her car towed, call her husband to find out which garage she should use for the repairs, call the insurance company, and call her kids to tell them she would be a little late getting home. Turning away from Steve, she reached into her pocket for her cell phone. Flipping it open, she started to dial and then noticed she had no reception. That was odd; she'd never had trouble with reception in this area before. She completed dialing anyway and pressed send. No response.

"Do you have a cell phone I can use?" she asked, turning back to Steve.

"No, I've never had one."

"Well, I need to find a phone. I need to call the police to report this accident, get a tow truck, call my family" her voice trailed away as Steve slowly shook his head at her.

"I told you, that's all being taken care of. You don't need to do anything."

Ann's face flushed. Who was this guy and what business of his was it anyway?

"Look, I appreciate you trying to help, but I can handle this. I'm going to go find a phone. Thanks anyway." She turned from him to start down the hill.

"It won't work."

His voice came over her shoulder as she walked.

"You're not going to find a phone."

Anger overcame caution as Ann whirled on him. "I don't know who you are or what you're doing here, but I want you to go away and leave me alone."

"I'm here to help you."

"I don't need your help."

"Look again at your car." He kept pace beside her as they drew close to the wreck.

Ann glanced at his face. His voice had suddenly gone deeper, and his expression had tensed.

"What do you mean?"

"Look again at your car."

By now, they had drawn level with what used to be her dark blue Volvo. Viewed at close range, the damage was devastating. The entire side of the car had collapsed inward, pushing the driver's door almost into the back seat. Shards of glass shimmered in the sunlight, surrounding the car in a halo of destruction.

Ann opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Steve was peering into her face. She closed her mouth and bit down sharply on her tongue, welcoming the brief burst of pain as much as the trickle of saliva. "It's amazing that I got out alive."

Steve shook his head slowly. Two deep lines appeared on his forehead.

The silence pressed down on her, leaving her gasping. Turning away from the wreck, Ann ran her hands through the body check once more. "But I'm fine! I don't have a cut or even a scratch! And I'm out here, there's no body in there."

"It's there, but you can't see it." Steve said. "It's a kindness."

"No, I don't believe it. It's not true. It can't be. There's my husband and kids; I can't leave them alone!"

Silently, Steve looked from her to the car and back again.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God." Ann pressed her fist to her mouth to stop the words. The wind picked up again, making a faint whistling as it swept over the odd new angles punched into the side of the car. It made a lonely sound that pulled away all sense of warmth, and she shuddered, over and over.

The Volvo seemed distorted in the sunlight, stretched out and folded in on itself at the same time. Ann looked away; anything to keep from focusing on the car and its implications. "Are you really Steve McQueen?" popped out of her mouth.

Steve's shoulders lowered as his head tilted back. His lips quirked and he nodded.

"Why are you here?"

"To help you."

She waved a hand toward him. "Why you?"

"I understand you're a fan."

Ann dipped her head once. "But what . . ."

"It helps to send someone meaningful to ease the first shock."

"But I don't know you, I've never met you."

The creases around Steve's eyes deepened as he smiled. "But you've wanted to."

That was true. Ann had often thought of how much she would like to meet the man behind the movies, but not this way.

"There wasn't really anyone else," Steve continued. "Your parents are still living, you don't remember your grandparents, and everyone else you're close to is still alive."

That was also true. Ann couldn't remember having gone to a funeral in her adult life. And now she never would. Instead, it would be her husband, her kids, and her parents who went. The wind had faded away, leaving silence and heat from the sun. Ann covered her face with her hands.

When she dropped her hands, Steve was still there. "Come on, there's nothing more to do here."

"Where do we go?"

He nodded toward the top of the hill, and began walking in that direction. Ann followed, taking two steps to each of his longer strides.

“Have you done this before?”

He stopped to look at her, eyebrows drawn together.

“I mean, help people.”

“Oh.” His expression relaxed again. “No. Just this once.”

They were almost to the top of the hill. “You haven’t given me much information.”

“I know. There isn’t really much I can give. It’s different for everyone.”

They crested the hill and stood together, looking down at the shore of a lake. There were trees to the right and left of it, but the shore immediately in front of them had a narrow, sandy beach. Ann could taste the tang of water on the wind, which came toward them as a gentle breeze.

She looked over at Steve. He was mounting a small motorcycle with knobby tires.

“What are you doing?”

“I have to go now.”

“Go? What do you mean?” Ann struggled to keep her voice steady.

“I’m going for a ride. It looks like there are some really nice trails over there, and this is a perfect day.”

A perfect day? Considering what just happened to her? Ann opened her mouth to argue further, but any chance to do so was lost in the clamor of the motorcycle’s engine as Steve kicked it into life, revved it twice, and roared off down the hillside.

Ann was left again with the silence and the wind. She looked back to where her Volvo had been parked but saw only undulating grass. The road and car had vanished. She shivered, turning her back on the breeze, and began walking slowly down toward the lake.

The beach was small but bright with smooth yellow sand, and the lake water was a clear blue. Sunlight rippled across small waves kicked up by the gusts of wind. It seemed empty until Ann looked to the left of the beach. A small boat was lying on its side in the shadow of the trees. She moved cautiously toward the boat and almost bumped into the man standing in the shade at the edge of the water.

His khaki shorts and yellow windbreaker stuck to his body and dripped excess water. He stood, shoulders hunched, in water up to his ankles and shivered at intervals.

“Come stand in the sun.” Ann spoke without thinking. “It’s warmer.”

The man turned, his wide staring eyes hardly focusing. “Did you see that storm?”

Ann shook her head.

"It came out of nowhere. One minute I was sailing at a good clip, the next half my mast was gone." His voice trailed away and he looked back at the boat with a shudder. "I don't know how I got out alive."

Oh no, Ann thought, not him too.

"Come into the sun," she repeated.

The man stumbled toward the beach. The sunlight caught his face, glinting off the water droplets on his cheeks and chin. Once out of the water, he turned toward Ann.

"What?" He stopped abruptly, his eyes widening and his mouth half open.

Has he figured it out already? Ann wondered. I hope so; I don't want to be the one to tell him.

"Ann?"

Now it was her turn to stare. How did he know her name?

"Ann Wentworth?"

That was her maiden name. "Ann Schneider, now," she answered automatically.

"Of course, you'd be married. But you haven't changed otherwise. Not like me. I'm afraid I've put on a few."

How did he know her? "I'm sorry," she faltered, "I don't . . ."

"Of course not. I don't think we ever spoke more than two words to each other the whole time we were in college. I'm Mike Vintner. We were in freshman English together, and I don't mind admitting I had a huge crush on you."

Dimly, she remembered. "Didn't you used to wear glasses?"

"Yep. Like coke bottles. I got that laser surgery done a couple of years ago and haven't missed them since." He shook his head. "I thought this was the worst day of my life when I got caught in that storm, but meeting you after all these years makes up for it."

Ann froze. He still didn't know.

"Listen, do you know where I could find a phone around here? I need to get in touch with someone to tow my boat back." He unzipped his windbreaker and peeled it off, exposing a white T-shirt with the logo "Sailors Do It On The Water" on the front. "That's better. I still can't get over that storm, blowing in out of nowhere and then vanishing completely. Where were you when it hit?"

"On the other side of the hill."

"I guess that protected you from the worst of it, but I can't understand how you stayed dry."

"I was inside my car."

"You've got a car here? This just keeps getting better. Would you mind driving me over to the dock? It's not too far, and I can make arrangements there to get my boat towed."

"I . . . I'm afraid I can't do that. My car isn't working."

"What do you mean? How'd you get here then?"

"There was an accident." This was awful. How could she tell him? Why did it have to be her?

"Accident! What happened?"

"The car was totaled."

"Jeezum, you were lucky to get out alive."

"I didn't. And neither did you, Mike." She nodded toward his boat. "I'm sorry."

His eyes widened then moved from her face to the boat and back again. He ran a hand through his hair, almost dry now, and tugged on it.

*He doesn't believe me, Ann thought. He thinks I'm crazy. I can't blame him, the whole thing is bizarre.*

Mike took a step back from her. "Look, I'm going to go check my boat." He turned and shuffled off down the beach. After a moment, Ann followed.

The boat was a jumble. The mast, sails, and lines were tangled together and jammed into a cleft in the hull. Mike surveyed the damage, looking sick.

"What a mess." Ann spoke softly, but Mike still shied away from her. "My car looked like that." No response. "I don't remember anything. Suddenly I was just standing on a hillside looking at the wreck of my car."

A shudder ran through Mike, and he finally turned to face her. "What the hell is going on?"

"I wish I knew." She filled him in on the events leading up to that moment. "I don't even know how much time has passed. It seemed like early afternoon then. It seems the same now."

His shoulders slumped, and he stumbled out of the water and back on to the beach next to her. "What now?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I'm not just going to stand around on this empty beach. I'm going to follow that path over there and see if I can find civilization." He gestured toward the woods on the opposite side of the beach. A narrow path led off through the trees, and Mike marched across the sand in that direction.

Ann fell in behind him. They walked in silence; the only sounds were the rustling of the leaves in the gentle breeze. She noticed Mike's clothes had dried completely.

Soon he grunted and started to move faster. "That's more like it."

Lifting her head, Ann saw a lighter area ahead where the trees thinned out. Hurrying, she caught up to Mike as he emerged onto a paved street lined with a mix of houses and stores.

“Now we’ll get some answers,” Mike said, and moved purposefully down the sidewalk. Ann looked from side to side as she walked, struck by the seemingly normal street with absolutely no one on it.

Mike stopped at an intersection and asked, “Which way?”

Ann hardly heard him, her attention held by the corner store. The window was full of yarn, and what a selection! The colors glowed in the bright sunlight, and the textures cried out to be touched. There were several sweaters displayed in the background, and Ann was intrigued by a stitch combination she’d never seen before.

“I’m going to stop in here.”

“What do you mean? We need to find out what’s going on.”

“I’ve never seen yarn like this before. I want to get a closer look.” She paused in the doorway and glanced back. Mike looked bewildered. His now dry hair blew across his forehead in the gusts of wind sweeping around the corner. “Good luck.”

“Wait,” Mike said, his forehead creased and his shoulders rising and drawing in toward his neck. “Don’t you want to find out what’s happened?”

Ann had a sudden vision of him from college. He’d had the same look whenever the professor called on him and he was unprepared. “Right now I want to look around in this store.” She passed through the doorway. Mike and his lost look receded as she immersed herself in the brilliant hues, vibrant textures, and earthy smells of the yarn around her. *Ahh*, she thought, looking closely at a sample, *I can do that*. Picking up a pair of needles, she sat down to prove it.

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