

VOX HUMANA

The Human Voice

A Novel

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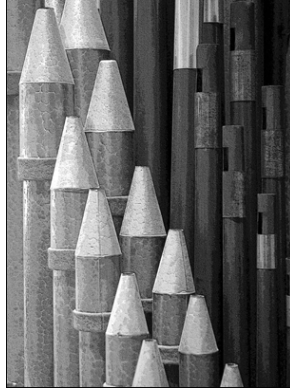
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THE VOX HUMANA [LATIN FOR THE HUMAN VOICE] IS A STOP ON THE PIPE ORGAN SO-NAMED BECAUSE OF ITS SUPPOSED RESEMBLANCE TO THE HUMAN VOICE. IT IS ALMOST NEVER USED ALONE.

For those who are lucky or persistent or both, there are moments in their lives when *who they are*—their inner lives—and *what they do*—their external ones—come together. In such moments, they catch a profound glimpse of why they exist and where their lives are headed. Vocal coaches and writing instructors sometimes call it, *finding our voice*.

As for the rest of the time, fortunately, it is not our mistakes that define us, it is our ability to strike that first terrifying note and then just play on, just keep going. The art of life, like the art of music, lies not in perfection but in the grace with which we manage to recover.

❖ Chapter One

A day shy of two weeks after my abrupt change in status from Char Howard *civil servant* to Char Howard *reluctant retiree*, I left Philadelphia for parts West, my hometown of Hope, Pennsylvania. The heavens were weeping at the prospect. I had cried myself out days ago.

It was hard either to laugh or cry in my poor hatchback, crammed to the roof with house plants, as I plodded along on autopilot behind the moving truck. From rising to setting sun, Pennsylvania is one very long state—its diagonal from the Atlantic to the Great Lakes just as intimidating. I had plenty of time to think about what was waiting for me on the other end.

Memories rose up and fell behind me like the rain-shrouded waves of the mountains en route, range after range of them—first the Appalachians, then the Alleghenies. Beyond those last foothills lay Hope, a mere stone's throw from the smokestacks of Ohio and the sprawling Midwestern prairie.

It was the Hope of my childhood I was remembering. Idyllic tree-canopied streets clustered around the gingerbread-and-red-brick heart of Main Street. Wispy threads of wood smoke drifted in the crisp winter dawn, and on summer nights, fireflies darted like fairy lights through the tall grass of the encroaching farm fields while tree frogs rasped out their fugues to the velvet sky.

I had grown up in that house. When Gram Grunwald lost her beloved husband to a farm accident, she set aside her own grief long

enough to open her home and life to her divorced daughter, my mother, without reproach or complaint. I was only four at the time.

Decades later, again without hesitation, the two of them had offered me their help with raising my girls after my husband died so early in our marriage. Jen was three, Sarah one. It was my choice to soldier on alone in Philadelphia—kept afloat by a civil service job that would have been hard to come by back home in Hope.

But it was not my own strength that I drew on in those dark days after Len walked into the jungles of Vietnam and never came back. Even now I couldn't begin to articulate how deeply that distant homestead and the courage of those strong Grunwald women had imprinted my life.

After all those years, I was going home. Problem was, missing from those life-shaping memories of my youth were the very people who were drawing me there, the family I had loved and lost to time. *Mom. Gram Grunwald.* It suddenly hurt even to name them.

Up ahead I saw the turn-signal light on the moving van—forced myself to fall in behind it as it crept around an even slower eighteen-wheeler. With any luck we would make it just in time for the driver to return the favor and pass us on the downhill stretch. Instinctively, my hands tightened on the steering wheel, anticipating a thunderclap of a *Woooo-sh* as the wake from that monster of a truck buffeted my tiny hatchback.

Reality check. Except for my realtor, Todd Rutterbach, I was coming back to a community of strangers.



Moving day, the first day of the rest of my life, had started with a headache. It pounded away in my temples like a harried rookie percussionist I once saw navigating the final bars of the *1812 Overture*—half a beat behind.

Not an auspicious beginning. Crawling out of my sleeping bag spread on the carpeted floor of an otherwise empty bedroom in my Philly apartment, I headed for the bathroom. My footfalls echoed on the bare wood of the hallway.

I made a point of evading the eyes reflected back at me from the bathroom mirror as I yanked open the medicine chest. Somewhere in that ragged assortment of outdated childproof bottles I had intended to leave behind, there had to be something that spelled, Relief.

No sudden moves, I told myself. *Caffeine*. But then it hit me.

The moving van was parked outside and my driver was already on his way. Under the circumstances, nuking the day-old coffee left sitting in my mug on the kitchen counter was my only alternative. I already had packed most of my utensils along with the coffee maker.

While I waited for the microwave to work its magic, it finally dawned on me that the message light on my answering machine was blinking. Apparently in my volatile emotional state and exhaustion during last night's last-ditch packing, I had not even bothered to check.

I clicked the Play button. The faint sound of shuffling papers gave way to a familiar voice, male and way too cheerful for a Saturday morning.

"Char Howard . . .? It's Todd Rutterbach . . . your realtor. Just checking in. But then maybe you're already on your way. The renters moved out end of last week and I sent someone over to your place yesterday to give it a cleanup and make sure the utilities are turned on when you arrive. Thought you'd want to know tha—"

The voice sped up toward the end as if the agent knew he was running out of time. To no avail. He broke off mid-word, replaced by a sequence of high-decibel beeps, like those rhythmic dinging sounds from the microwave when it finishes a cycle.

For the first time it struck me in the frustrating silence that followed, how obsessed we are about time in our culture, even programming our appliances to remind us that precious commodity is fleeting. Futile, all of it. I never could remember how long it takes to reheat a cup of coffee. More often than not, my own garbled phone messages broke off mid-stream, as unsatisfactory to the caller as to the recipient.

Well, there was no time like the present to find out what my realtor wanted. I punched in the speed dial. After three rings, I started to assume the worst. I was going to be playing phone tag for the rest of the day.

"Hullo . . .?"

Not Todd, that much was certain. The six-or-so-year-old voice on the other end of the phone line sounded suspicious, annoyed.

Boy or girl? I only remembered something about a lot of little Rutterbachs.

"Is your daddy home?"

"He's sleeping."

I looked at my watch. Seven A.M.—retired and perfectly entitled to sleep in at long last. Instead, here I was terrorizing the first working stiff on my list. *Brilliant*. Before I could counsel otherwise, the young receptionist hollered for his dad.

“He’s coming. I’m watching cartoons.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know it was so early.”

Somehow that revelation didn’t make the voice on the other end of the line sound any happier. Eventually a muffled conversation from the other end of the line was followed by the thud of the phone receiver hitting the floor.

“Todd Rutterbach . . .!”

“Char. Sorry to bother you so early. I got your message.”

“No problem. So . . . we’re on then, for the move?”

“We leave within the hour. My lease here in Philly expires tomorrow. So it’s really good timing, as it turns out.”

None of that, I realized, mattered one iota to my realtor, one way or the other. But then I had forgotten how personal small town life could be.

Todd Rutterbach was not just my rental manager, he was Hope’s unofficial mayor and operated the town’s only surviving retail establishment of any note, a tiny but stocked-to-the-ceiling hardware—a little like the growing mountain of cartons that had been accumulating in my Philly walk-up apartment for a month now, ever since I signed on the dotted line and took the buyout my boss at the Job Service was offering. Rutterbachs even had a half-aisle of groceries.

“Call me on my cell,” Todd said. “I’ll have a couple of guys ready to help you unload.”

“That’s not necessary—”

“Part of the service.”

Lovely. For weeks now my daughter Jen had been urging me just to throw the stuff in the truck and then do my sorting and discarding on the other end. Tempting, but that was before I knew about these anonymous hired hands my realtor had recruited to help. It would be all over the county in a matter of hours what a thorough pack-rat the new arrival was.

I got off the line, went to rescue my coffee—the timer had protested a long time ago. As I opened the door, dark pools of liquid had boiled over the top of the mug and were spreading over the glass turntable.

“Son-of-a-gun!”

The phone was ringing again. This was getting worse than the Monday morning crunch down at the employment office. Coffee-soaked paper toweling in one hand, I made a grab for the receiver.

“Mom?”

My oldest daughter Jen had put down roots in suburban Pittsburgh

with husband Jason and a son and daughter, both under age three. Amazing what parenthood will do to revive mother-daughter relationships. This time, the hour was early even for her.

“Something’s wrong?”

“Just wanted officially to wish you a happy retirement.”

I told her about dragging the realtor out of bed. Jen laughed.

“Just wait another month,” I said, “I won’t know what day or month it is, shuffling around at all hours in my bathrobe.”

Jen’s laughter sounded more tentative now. “Seriously, Mom, you’re doing . . . okay?”

“Fine.”

My daughter had plenty of practice recognizing evasion when she heard it. During the worst of her adolescence, that particular adverb—*fine*—and the subtle ambiguity it conveyed had been a staple of her vocabulary.

“I’d be happy to take off from work a day or two,” she told me. “I’ll just drive up there and help you unpack. It’s going to be so great finally to have you living so close.”

It was a noble gesture, albeit unrealistic. Jen was new at her job as guidance counselor with the local school district. Personal time right now would not be the best idea in the world.

“I’m really on top of it, Jen. But thanks for the offer.”

Truth was, in the entire month since I signed on the dotted line of that buy-out package at the Job Service, my walk-up apartment had looked like a warehouse gone amuck. And right now I couldn’t care less whether I ever saw any of the stuff ever again.

Background noises told me my grandchildren were getting impatient with the lack of attention. I smiled. Time to cut it short.

“You know, Mom . . .”

Jen paused, hand over the receiver while she settled down the troops, “I had my doubts when you told me you were moving back to Hope. That lasted about thirty seconds. Then I thought about that beautiful old house of Great-gram’s and all those good times back in western PA when we were little and— ”

“A long time ago.”

“True, Mom. Although the one thing you always taught us, my sister and me, was how to be survivors. Hang on to the best, let go of the rest, you always said. Just keep breathing!”

I was glad my daughter couldn’t see my face. *Out of the mouths of babes.* Our laughter felt good, liberating.

“Okay, so just take a deep breath, Mom. I’m sure you will figure this out—”

“Thanks for the pep talk, honey. I needed that.”

More than my daughter even suspected. I held the phone in my hand for a good while before setting it down again on the kitchen counter.

By now, my coffee was cold, but mercifully adequate for washing down those three tablets still lying there. My headache had mutated from a percussive annoyance to a vise-twisting cry for help.

Time to pump up the volume a notch, get myself in gear. My ancient boom-box of a radio was one of my last possessions still left in the apartment—the thing took up half the top of my refrigerator. Music had been my passion as long as I could remember and like the pre-set buttons on a pipe organ, my instrument of choice, I had programmed the station pre-sets to my favorite classical stations.

Instant connection. Startled, I flinched at the ruthlessly cheerful early Baroque flute concerto trilling away in the stratosphere. I had accompanied a soloist on the piece once—knew where those cascading sixteenth notes were headed.

“Enough of that,” I muttered. Flipping the dial, I settled on the languid twang of a country-rock station. “How could you go-o-o and leave me hurtin’?”

Grabbing one of the last remaining empty cartons, I began dumping the few remaining kitchen utensils into the void, dirty dishes and all, and padding the most fragile items with the contents of the towel drawer. I topped off the box with the hand-braided rug from in front of the sink.

All the while my daughter’s words kept playing themselves over and over again in my head. *Keep moving—literally and figuratively.*



Keep moving. As strategies went, I had to admit, it was pretty primitive.

Still, as I focused on that moving van up ahead of me, right now nothing else seemed to make any sense. My whole life was packed away in that innocuous rental. At this point, there was little for me to do but doggedly follow where it took me.

