

**On the Verge Writing Contest 2020, First-Place Fiction Winner  
By Hana Mason**

**Wheat King**

When she opens her eyes, stiff and gritty to meet the day, Bonny will rise from her bed and step heavy on the floor. There will be a creak. Will it be her knees, or the floorboards today? No one's to say. Might be both. Bonny will dress slowly, brush her hair slowly, apply expensive wrinkle cream slowly and red lipstick slowly. Dior 999. She's worn it everyday for years. She will hate to look in that magnifying mirror, but it must be done. Those damn wrinkles. Concealer and mascara, new fangled makeup, won't help much. The eyeliner she had tattooed years ago. Don liked it.

Don. When Bonny's done with the dressing and brushing and the wrinkle cream and the new fangled makeup, she'll go to see Don. She and Minnie, their daughter, haven't convinced him to go into a home yet. All his friends hate their homes. But, all his friends can remember what they hate. Bonny will drive the fifteen minutes from her place to Don's in her old car, the car she really should have given to her granddaughter, but

kept when Don got sick. No use in having a sixteen-year-old helping her Alzheimer's riddled Pop-Pop run silly errands. No use in her seeing him slowly dying. On the drive Bonny will think about all those teens that die so quick – they flip their car or shoot down an abandoned luge track at night and are gone. Poor Don's got to go slow and her poor grandchildren have to watch.

In Don's driveway, Bonny will park the car that should belong to her granddaughter and check the lock twice. In the back seat are Don's hockey sticks and golf clubs. He isn't to be trusted with them anymore. It's too dangerous for him out on the rink. They took away his car last month. Chopped up his license. When Bonny enters his condo - the same place he crash-landed after the divorce, no different than when he moved there twenty years ago – she uses her ladybug-print key. He'll be looking for his wallet.

Bonny. Where's my driver's license? Where are my keys?

You don't drive anymore, Don.

Oh. Right.

Maybe Don's in a good mood. Might make a joke or two later when he has to ask the bank teller the same question twice or forgets his pin again. Bonny will help him settle his cheque book, then stop by the grocery store, then drive him back home for lunch. He's more lucid on days he's eaten well. When Bonny goes to check his fridge, all she'll see is a jar of pickles and some milk. In the freezer she'll find Tupperware after Tupperware of Minnie's frozen soups, uneaten. She'll purse her lips and nod. There's always work to be done.

When Bonny met Don, he was handsome. Taught, tan skin and an athlete's body. He always insisted he could have gone pro with hockey one day, if he hadn't had a family, if he hadn't taken it down to a recreation league.

I would'a made a killer defenseman, and we could'a lived large, Bon. I was almost a Wheat King.

Sure thing, Don.

But I stopped. For you, Bonny. I stopped for you.

I know, Don.

Don was a tall man who held himself that way. When Bonny stands next to him in the kitchen of his condo, she'll wonder if he got shorter or if he's just standing that way. Minnie's always been a tall girl, and she used to complain that even the tall boys acted short.

Bonny fell in love with Don because he was charismatic. He'd bring her flowers every day for a week; take her to all the nicest places. Bonny was a busy girl, back then. A teacher. Her students loved Don. They called him Don The Hockey Man. And Bonny's mother loved him, too. Little did they know.

Don and Bonny don't live together anymore. Haven't in years. One day Bonny decided she had been quiet too long. A man as charismatic as Don liked to talk and he liked to be right. Teenagers, and they had three, like to be right. And those teenagers turned into adults, who, when it comes to their geriatric parents, like to be right. Bonny likes to be right too, she'd just never said so before the divorce. Now she's right back to letting Don be right. But at least she's needed. The teenagers-turned-adults don't need her

anymore. Minnie's the only one who didn't move away. The others might call at Christmas. Don will need her everyday.

While Bonny drives to the bank, Don will repeat his pin number ten times. 7560. 7560. Bonny will think she'll probably remember that damn pin number in the afterlife. Don will forget soon.

At the bank, it'll be all people like Don and Bonny. Old people. The kids use their phones for banking nowadays. Heck, Minnie even got Bonny set up. But she comes to the bank with Don everyday anyways. He needs her.

The teller will know Don and Bonny. They all do.

Settling the books again, Don?

Yes.

Do you remember your pin?

Uhhh....

Bonny will want to scream at him, but she'll know she can't. She knows she should just say nothing. Wait. See if he remembers. Don't remind him why he forgot, or he'll get upset. He'll get mean. But she'll see the teller growing impatient, and Don growing frustrated. That isn't why she's here. She's here to help.

She'll balance Don's books, then her own, and they'll be gone. She'll hear the teller's sigh of relief as they walk out the door. Some help they were.

On the way to the grocery store, Don will sort his coupons. 15% off raspberries. \$7 for a whole roast chicken. Bonny will take the long way and takes her sweet time parking. Don

won't say anything about her red lipstick. Don used to love the red lipstick. Bonny doesn't expect him to say anything, not since the divorce, not since Don got sick. The Alzheimer's makes Don forget to be mean, but it also makes him forget to be kind.

Together Don and Bonny will browse the produce isle for his discounted raspberries; go to the deli for the chicken, the bakery for 10% off bread. Bonny will insist on buying lettuce and tomatoes she knows Don won't eat.

Even Don the Hockey Man needs nutrients.

I get my nutrients.

Bonny will just nod. The supplements she'll have to get at the pharmacy, later, when he's sleeping. For now, Don will have to do with the raspberries and the chicken and the bread and the soon to be rotten vegetables.

Don will count his coins all by himself. The cashier will be a young thing, younger than Minnie's boys. Acned. Sweaty. He'll re-count the coins, to double check. Bag the items in the canvas bag Bonny brought. It's the least she can do.

Don will insist he carry the bag to the car. Bonny will drive home.

Back at Don's condo, Bonny will grab the bag and her keys and go to unpack the groceries. Don will open the trunk of the car – that stupid car that shouldn't even be Bonny's anymore - and grab his hockey stick.

You driving me to practice later?

You don't play anymore.

What?

You don't play hockey anymore, Don. Doctor's orders.

Don will get frustrated. Try to get the heavy hockey bag from the trunk and drop his stick. It will clang on the icy ground.

Bonny will try to rip the bag from Don's hands. To keep him safe. To help him. He needs her.

Another clang on the icy ground. More like a thump this time.

In the bathroom, Bonny will dab away at the blood coming from the split in her forehead, sickeningly red against her pale tissue-paper skin. She'll reapply the red lipstick, the same colour as the blood. Dior 999. Don will be on the couch with his 15% off raspberries in a bowl on his lap, a bright ring of the juice all around his lips. Red like the blood, too. He'll look like a vampire. Life-sucking. Bonny will bring a frozen Tupperware of soup out on the counter to thaw.

Do you need me to heat up the soup?

No. I can do it. I remember.

Bonny will wonder if maybe she shouldn't have let him eat the raspberries. Without those damn *nutrients* he'd still be angry and confused. He'd still need her. She wants him to need her. She'll leave a big red kiss-print on the post-it note reminding him how to do the soup. Just in case he forgets. Just in case he needs her. She's here to help. It's the least she can do. There's always work to be done.

*1474 words*