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To Know a Stretch of Road

By Dana Sweeney

It happened while I was merging onto the interstate. I was distracted by an argument I’d had with a co-worker earlier that day, and I didn’t see the layer of ice coating the end of the ramp until my headlights shined off its glassy surface— until it was too late.

The car slid straight out onto the highway. My stomach immediately dropped, and I could make no sound as I caught sight of the countless sets of brilliant lights headed at seventy miles per hour in my direction. My world filled with the shrill, grating noise of car horns blaring as they sped past, and everything seemed to slow around me. I saw the 18-wheeler coming only moments before it hit me, but with adrenaline heightening my senses, the seconds before impact stretched into the days and years of my life.

Then, there was only mayhem.

* * *

What is left of my car lies scattered across three lanes of highway. Traffic slowly inches past in the fourth. I can see the occupants staring, some openmouthed, at the smoking display of broken glass and twisted metal that was a car only minutes ago. A wide-eyed young boy pushes himself against the frosted glass of his window as he passes. A woman in the next car crosses herself. I can’t bear the looks of consideration coming from the passerby; I look away. My legs are shaking, so I fall into a sitting position on a small snow bank plowed against the guardrail. Despite the slight snowfall and the sight of my breath rising starkly into the air, I am not cold.

Sirens begin to wail somewhere in the distance, slowly growing louder. They are undoubtedly coming for me. Tearing my eyes away from the sight of my car’s remains, I look at the truck for the first time in any detail. The front grill is smashed in, and one of the headlights
has gone out. The trailer is a vibrant red-orange, standing out in sharp relief against the harsh white of the snow and the cold grey of everything else. Smoke pours out of its engine, and I watch it twist and rise without direction into the clear night sky.

The first responders arrive. They jump out of their vehicle before it even comes to a stop and dash to the truck carrying their first-aid equipment. The driver is pulled from his cab with care. Aside from a large gash on his forehead, I’m relieved to see that he’s okay. The paramedics prop him into a sitting position against his front wheel, and I watch as two of the three paramedics rush over to where the remains of my car sit. Illuminated by the one working headlight on the truck, I see the pair of them begin to start digging through the wreckage to try to get to me. Three more emergency vehicles pull up, and their occupants leap out to assist in trying to sift through the heap of scrap metal.

The flashing red and blue lights of the emergency vehicles reflect on the surface of a million pieces of the jagged, broken glass that litters the ground before me, creating a dazzling array of dancing colors and lights. It is truly a breathtaking sight. Only the sound of a great commotion manages to draw my attention back to the rescue workers surrounding my vehicle. They’ve found me. They’re in the process of trying to free one of my legs in order to get me out of the driver’s seat. I watch silently as they pull me from the wreckage and begin CPR. They work hard to get a sign of life from me, but when the defibrillator fails for the third time, I see the lead paramedic give a tired shake of his head, and I watch from my snow bank as I am covered and loaded into the back of a departing ambulance.

* * *

The ruined body of my car has been towed away, and a crew is trying to sweep up the last fragments of glass from the asphalt. A brigade of a half dozen push brooms clears the ground of
all evidence that anything tragic occurred on this spot. At the sound of a voice over their radios, the crew packs it up. The ground is clear again, except for a few fragments of taillight missed. It is dawn when the last vehicle leaves the scene. I watch as it pulls away, entering the fray of automobiles speeding by and losing itself among them. The first rays of a promised sunrise are breaking through the trees across the highway. The cars trickle by in a steady stream, which soon becomes a torrent as the morning rush hour kicks in.

All lanes of traffic are open again.

I rise from my snow bank to watch the commuters. They are completely oblivious to my tragedy, showing no signs of knowledge or care. I watch a thousand people pass me by, all living out the patterns of their lives. How many days was I one of them? One of the thousands of people defined by their patterns, entrenched in complacency and compliance? The traffic doesn’t slow. All of the drivers are focused on reaching their destination and nothing else. I am alone on the side of this highway.

It strikes me how cold it is that the world didn’t stop for me. But when I look, I can see that the stretch of road I stand beside is no different from any other. There is nothing special about this place. There are no indicators of the events of recent past. I realize that this is just a stretch of highway now, and I am ready to move on. There is no sense in dwelling here. The sun has already climbed halfway up the sky, and somehow, I know that it’s time to go. I start walking. I don’t know where I’m going, but I’m going somewhere.

So I walk; because nobody stops for a dead man.