

Sunrise

We could have stopped at a motel and continued our drive in the morning. We could afford it even though money was tight. It was just one more night. But we didn't stop.

"We don't need to stop for the night! I can drive!" I insisted to my sleepy husband that night.

"I don't know, you haven't driven the rental so far." He responded cautiously.

"It'll be fine, just show me. I'm a good driver and you know that I can do it. I've pulled plenty of all-nighters before in school. This way we can save money on a motel. Plus, we'll have more time at our new place together if we get through this part of the road trip faster."

He sighed, well aware that he could not convince me otherwise – as usual. He sighed, patted my knee gently, and pulled into a self-serve gas station. After he filled up, I got out and reached for his hand. We held hands and walked over to the dark nothingness beside the gas station. I leaned into him, feeling the comforting scent of my home, my everything, my husband. He put his arm around me, kissed my forehead, and we looked up at the stars, witnessing the incomprehensible beauty of a universe larger than us. Snuggling alone at midnight, in the middle of nowhere, I felt peace.

"Ready to drive?" He asked.

I nodded.

We went back to the car and this time I got into the driver's seat. He explained the car controls to me and leaned back tensely in his seat. As I drove off onto the Ontario highway, he slowly relaxed into a light sleep.

I was cautious at first – I had heard of lots of collisions with wildlife on this section of the highway, and the last thing I wanted to do was kill an innocent animal. But I also enjoyed driving fast, and on a long rural highway in the middle of the night I had the opportunity to drive faster than I had ever been able to do before. All I had to do was turn my high beam on and keep a close eye. Before long, I was comfortable with the variations in the repetitive road, the winding to the left, the winding to the right, the hills up and then down. No animals around. Husband sleeping soundly.

After about four hours, we reached a foggy area. It was eerie in the silence of the night, especially as I was starting to get tired. The grey blanket on the world made it impossible to see any more than a couple meters in front of me. It felt mystical, reminiscent of patches of driving through the Rocky Mountains on this cross-country road trip.

It was almost another hour when the fog lifted and I realized there was water to our right. The sky was brightening on the horizon with a sliver of pink, then a sliver of orange, blending into multiple shades of blue. I gazed in wonder at the dark pastel painting of the world, its beauty mirrored in the still waters of Lake Superior as the fog was now almost completely gone. I smiled peacefully, sleepily at the view, now in an exhausted but blissful daze. I revelled in the view. Not in the road ahead of me.

Suddenly, a small creature ran across the road, nothing more than a round backside and a head, like a beige raccoon without a tail. Whatever it was, I wasn't going to hit it. I swerved.

But I was going fast on the highway. I felt it instantly – when I swerved, I lost control of the car.

I tried to swerve back the other way. We headed towards the lake. *No!* I swerved back. I had to right it. I couldn't. I just kept trying. *I can do this.* I couldn't. I couldn't fix it.

Are we going to die? This isn't happening. I thought. *This can't be happening. This isn't real.* But it was, no matter what I did.

It was all happening so fast. My husband woke up from the aggressive inertia of the car and yelled out in fear. "Hubby!" I called out, my voice shrill, terrified.

This uncontrolled zigzagging of the car led us into the ditch, but still I tried to swerve out of it. I don't know what happened next, it was too fast, but suddenly we were flipping in the ditch, screaming, spinning. I reached out into an abyss for a hand I couldn't find.

One, two, three times – then we landed on the passenger side of the car. My husband pushed through the shattered windshield immediately and was standing outside in no time. Meanwhile, I was trapped, the seatbelt cutting into my neck, the car beeping in a panicked state.

"Wifey? Are you okay?" My husband called, sounding drunk.

"I'm okay!" I was wide awake now. I reached for my phone in my coat pocket and called 911. I told them we had an accident on the highway, I looked at the GPS on my phone to tell them we were in Batchawana Bay, I answered several questions about the accident, I turned the ignition off as instructed, and then I relaxed knowing that help was on the way.

"Wifey, I... I think we need to go to the hospital. I'm bleeding a lot." He said, still slurring his words. I asked him to come closer. Through the broken bits of glass, I saw blood all over his face, with no facial wounds. The bleeding was coming from his head.

He's going to die and it's my fault. The thought flashed through my head, and then I put it aside so I could focus on getting out.

I contorted my body so that I was no longer sitting sideways - instead I was almost standing on my tiptoes on the passenger window. The seatbelt was still cutting into my neck, but I barely felt it. I unclicked my seatbelt and dropped an inch onto my toes. Strangers came from nearby homes, having heard the crash, and they pulled the remaining shards of windshield away so I could walk out amid the wreckage of car parts and blood. With all eyes on me in my white lace summer dress, I felt like a child that had no right to drive. I averted my eyes from the light reflecting on the water, ashamed.

My husband and I felt surprisingly fine at that point, despite the blood on his head and the gash in my neck. The strangers insisted we go to the hospital anyway, which we had every intention of doing when the paramedics arrived.

In the ambulance, the paramedics paid me little mind as I was clearly fine. They examined my husband more closely. "The left pupil's blown." One of the paramedics said. I inhaled sharply, daggers in my chest. We proceeded to the hospital at Sault Ste. Marie for treatment.

Four months later, I reached out to stroke my husband's cheek as we woke up to the natural autumn sunlight. I had lost count of how many times I saw the accident in my dreams, always waking

damp with sweat, my heart pounding. I calmed once I saw his handsome face, every feature exactly as I had memorized it, perfectly contoured with a few days' stubble. He roused and smiled gently at me.

"Good morning, hubby." I said softly. "Drive me to work today?"

"I thought you wanted to try driving?" He asked. I shyly put my hand over the scar on my neck and shook my head. He nodded, "Okay, I'll drive you again." Then he squeezed me into a warm embrace and kissed my forehead. Home.

I reconsidered halfway through breakfast and decided it was time to try. I drove 20 km below the speed limit, eyes wide open, my hands clenched so hard on the steering wheel that my hands hurt, nervously watching for any possible obstacle in the road.

The road out of our suburb was repetitive, winding to the left, then winding to the right, hills up and then down. One of the curves in the road was a little too sharp, felt a little too fast... my stomach lurched, my heart skipped a beat, suddenly it was dark, I was driving much faster, and I couldn't slow down no matter how much I braked. A split second later, it was daylight again and I had stopped in the middle of the road, gasping for air. I parked the car and started sobbing.

"Wifey! Wifey, what's wrong?" My husband asked gently. I put my face in my hands and cried.

"You're dead and it's all my fault." I sobbed almost incoherently, my heart squeezing.

"I'm right here! Nothing's your fault. Honey, I love you." He took one hand from my face and tried to meet my eyes, concern written all over his face.

"No, no, no." I sputtered, struggling to breathe. "How can you love me? Why would you love me? I hurt you. I hurt you so much. You can't still love me. I don't deserve your love."

"Yes, you do, and I do love you." He told me sternly, now holding both my hands with firm eye contact. "The accident is behind us and I'm fine."

My crying stilled. I examined him with my eyes. "How are you fine?" I remembered the hospital, the stitches, the reassurances, but it just didn't make sense. I was driving so fast on the highway, the car flipped repeatedly, he hit his head, he was bleeding profusely, and he had a blown pupil. How could he be fine? It just could not be possible to survive that.

"You're not really here, are you?" I said. "This isn't real."

I blinked, and he was gone. I faintly heard him saying, "Of course it's real." But I couldn't see him, and soon his voice faded away. I looked around in the car, searching for him, and it was night again.

He was outside, filling the car with gas. After he filled up, I got out and reached for his hand. We held hands and walked over to the dark nothingness beside the gas station. I leaned into him, feeling the comforting scent of my home, my everything, my husband. He put his arm around me, kissed my forehead, and we looked up at the stars, witnessing the incomprehensible beauty of a universe larger than us. Snuggling alone at midnight, in the middle of nowhere, I felt peace.

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