

The Lindenwood Review

Volume 1 | Issue 11

Article 16

6-2021

Crash Corner

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Recommended Citation

Askwith, Kelsey (2021) "Crash Corner," *The Lindenwood Review*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 11 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/lindenwood-review/vol1/iss11/16>

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Crash Corner

Tanya lived near a busy, poorly controlled intersection, and so kept a pot of coffee on during the winter, and a large pitcher of lemonade in the fridge during the summer. She sat on a stool looking out the kitchen window, leaning her elbow on the counter, waiting. There was an accident almost every day. Sometimes, if it had just snowed, or if it had rained and then froze, there were many accidents. There were more accidents in the winter than in the summer, which was why Tanya looked forward to the drop in temperature and the first snowfall every year.

As soon as she heard the thud and shattering glass, she shuffled to the coffee pot and filled up lidded Styrofoam cups with coffee, fit them into cardboard drink carriers she collected from fast food restaurants, and headed down the sidewalk toward the street in her alpaca fur slippers, pushing a squeaky wheeled grocery cart laden with the Styrofoam cups. She leaned heavily on the grocery cart, pushing its slick wheels through the snow and ice, and leaning on the handle for support.

She knew everyone from the firehouse and police station and looked forward to seeing them. She knew most of the paramedics, too, but there was a fast turnover for paramedics. The new ones ignored her until they got to know her. The cops mostly told her to back up, but took her coffee anyway. Tanya liked the firefighters best. They always treated her nice, and no matter what, once the work was done, accepted her coffee with a smile and thank you.

She gave coffee to the victims of the accidents too. Usually, they were dumbfounded, and accepted the cup without realizing it was in their hands. She often had to nudge their elbows up to get them to drink. Some were angry and shouted at her because they shouted at everyone. She didn't take it personal. She waited until they were done shouting and extended a cup, which they dumbly accepted. After a few sips, their face muscles would relax, and Tanya would smile with the thought that she'd made a new friend.

If it was a really big accident, she might have to shuffle back down the sidewalk with her grocery cart and fill more cups. She bought several packages every time she went to the dollar store. They filled two whole cupboards in her kitchen. She had another cupboard for her own ceramic mug and a single plate. A drawer contained one fork, one spoon, and one knife. There was a can opener for cat food. On the counter she kept a box of cereal and a box of instant rice. Next to the coffee maker was a can of coffee with a black-stained measuring spoon resting on the lid. She kept the stubs of her social security checks in another drawer that also held a thick note pad and a few cap-less pens.

The walls of her small but tidy house were empty, except for a crucifix that hung on a nail near the front door. There were no pictures of children or grandchildren smiling and waving. The surface of her fridge was clean—no magnets holding up invitations to weddings or birthday parties. She never received any Christmas cards.

Most days, Tanya left the TV on and listened to soap operas from her kitchen stool while she looked out the window. On particularly slow days, she would sigh and move from her stool to the tattered couch in the living room to see what was going on in the show.

Some days, however, Tanya's body would ache from head to toe so bad, she'd lie on her bed and watch the ceiling fan spin around. There, she'd talk to her cat, who rarely came out from under her bed except when he heard the click of the can opener.

"Tomkiss," Tanya would say into the ceiling fan. "Why don't you come out from under there and lay with me, you lazy old cat?" But the cat wouldn't budge. When it got past time for his food, she'd turn her head and find him sitting on the floor staring at her, his tail flicking. This made Tanya anxious. She'd heard of people who'd died and were devoured by their hungry cats, and she couldn't help but think that would happen to her some day.

Whenever Tanya lay in bed like this, she tried not to think of her mother, but no matter what kinds of distractions she employed, her mother would creep into her consciousness. First, just at the edges, Tanya pushing her away. But gradually, she'd get further and further in until Tanya could recall the way she wore her weave in a beehive, how tightly she puckered her lips, the wrinkles around her eyes and between her brows that never

went away. Tanya would close her eyes and see her mother scowling at her, telling her to get her lazy bones out of bed. Then she'd open her eyes, but still her mother's face was before her.

Tanya, herself, was older now than the image she carried of her mother, and yet seeing her mother's scowling face always caused her to shrink, to feel like a naughty child again who forgot to make her bed, or who spilled her glass of milk at supper.

"Come on out of there, Tomkiss," she'd say, dropping one hand over the edge of the bed in an attempt to lure out the cat and shake loose the shame that clung to her. He might sniff her fingers, or bat at them in a lazy sort of playfulness, but he never came out. He never climbed up on her bed to nuzzle her chin. He wouldn't lie down in the little space left between her two swollen legs. And this is when Tanya would cry, letting tears creep down her cheeks and land in her neck without bothering to wipe them away.

Yesterday had been one of those lie-in-bed sorts of days, so when Tanya looked out the window the next morning and saw a fresh coat of snow on the ground, her heart beat fast, and she put an extra scoop of coffee grounds into the coffee pot. She wrapped a quilt around her shoulders and sat on her stool, listening to the gurgling sound the machine made as it brewed. The sun rose and the smell of coffee filled her house and seeped out the cracks where the cold air came in. She hummed a pleasant tune and wondered what sort of friend she'd make today.

When the coffee finished brewing, she took her mug down from the cupboard and poured herself a cup. She brought it to her nose and smelled deeply, letting the scent warm her. Then she nestled down on her stool, the blanket pulled tight around her shoulders, and waited. Tanya smiled while she watched the traffic lights perform their dance: One light green, the other red; the first yellow, then red, and then the other green. Her eyes bounced back and forth when the lights changed colors.

She didn't have to wait long. When the light turned, Tanya watched, as if in slow motion, a speedy black car slip, tires screeching, until it hit the bumper of the car in front of it. The noise of the impact made Tanya blink. She heard the quick shatter of glass and eased off her stool. She was

across the kitchen in a step and filling Styrofoam cups, topping them with plastic lids.

She paused, considering the number of people who would be at the scene. It was a small accident. There would be at least two firefighters right away, and eventually the police would show up. But, she reasoned, it was unlikely anyone would call an ambulance. The victims were probably commuters at this hour, and she doubted either carried any passengers. Being able to anticipate exactly how many cups she'd need was a skill she was proud of, one she'd honed over the years.

When she finished filling the cups and putting on the lids, she placed them into the cardboard holders, and those into the grocery cart, which she kept just outside the front door. The quilt was still wrapped around her shoulders as she shuffled down the sidewalk, leaning on the cart and not daring to pick her feet up, sure there was a patch of ice hidden under the fresh snow.

By the time she reached the end of the sidewalk, the accident victims—an elderly man in a parka and a young woman in a wool coat—were exchanging information. The man stood before the woman, who sat in the driver's seat of the black car with her hand covering her forehead. The man seemed calm despite the damage to his car. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Saw what happened," Tanya said when she was close enough. She was winded, but felt giddy. The cold air stung her nostrils, which she flared.

The man turned at the sound of her voice. "Careful, Miss," he said, indicating the shattered glass.

"Thought you might need some coffee to warm you." She untucked one cup from the cardboard holder and handed it to the man. He hesitated, but took it and said, "Thank you." She held another out to the woman, who looked at her with disgust. The woman reached behind her and lifted a paper cup with a lid.

"I already have coffee." But she didn't drink any. Just sat it back down in the cup holder.

"This is hot," Tanya offered, still holding out the cup. "And fresh."

"No thank you." The woman slid her legs around and gripped the steering wheel. Tanya huffed. She'd dealt with people like this before. But

her joints held the remnants of her achy day in bed yesterday, and her heart burned at the rejection of her cat, the invading presence of her mother.

Tanya watched the woman, young and thin, with her whole life ahead of her. Her weave was silky, unlike Tanya's hair which she'd let go frizzy and gray. The woman's skin was still soft and supple, where Tanya's was wrinkled and spotted. The woman's set face, determined, brought to mind Tanya's mother when she would lead the two of them down the center aisle of the church for Sunday mass. All heads were turned toward them, the only black family in a Polish community, a community where Tanya never felt she belonged. She and her mother would make their way to the very front row where her mother would sit, turn her head in the direction of her neighbors, smiling and nodding in greeting. Then she'd turn to young Tanya and attempt to smooth down her daughter's curls. "Sit up straight," she'd mutter. Or "Don't rest your back on the pew while you're kneeling," "Fold your hands while you pray, and close your eyes," "Pull up your stockings," "How do you always manage to wrinkle your dress?" The memory made Tanya grit her teeth and crease her brow.

She could feel the shame and anger pooling inside her chest. She pressed it down and smiled at the woman. She could still win her over.

But the woman in the black car had pulled out her cell phone now, and Tanya listened to her conversation. When she heard the woman say, "Hi honey," Tanya imagined a handsome man who called the woman "sweetheart," or "baby," or maybe even "sugar." That's what her man had called her way back when, because he said she was as sweet as sugar, running his hands up and down her youthful, sixteen-year-old skin until she got goose bumps. And she melted into him, so much older and more knowing than she was. How could she in her innocence turn him away?

Tanya's brow furrowed deeper, and she stuck out her bottom lip. She tried again to push the shame down, but it was stuck there in her chest, making it difficult to breathe.

The fire truck had reached them now, and two firefighters got out.

"Tanya," they said in greeting, nodding to her as they rushed about, but she hardly heard them. She was trying to remember what it was that had drawn her to such a man. Perhaps it was his eyes the color of golden sap, eyes that devoured her when he looked at her. Or the mustache he grew, which made her feel older and more sophisticated,

even though it prickled her mouth when he kissed her. Perhaps it was the way he traced his fingers up and down her spine until she shuddered. Tanya watched absentmindedly as the firefighters talked to the accident victims. The woman put her phone down and shook her head while she talked to the firefighters. When the police came, they asked Tanya to step back. They took each of the victims' statements. The firefighters swept the bits of bumper and broken glass into the shoulder. Tanya shook her head to clear away the memories and stared hard at the woman in the wool coat. The young, foolish woman, who didn't have a clue what life was about, but exuded confidence she hadn't earned. Tanya stepped forward, extending the cup.

"You could at least take some coffee," she said to the woman, her eyes narrowed. She tried smiling, but her face muscles felt tight, stuck. Everyone turned and stared at her. "I went to all the trouble." She turned and indicated the wheel tracks in the snow from pushing the grocery cart.

"Tanya," one of the police officers said, stepping forward. His name was Frank, Tanya knew, and he had kind, tired eyes with wrinkles at the corners. He held up his hands as if in defeat. "Please," he said, his eyebrows raised. Tanya huffed and pulled the quilt more tightly over her shoulders.

"I'll take one," said one of the firefighters, taking the extended cup. "Thanks, Tanya," she said.

Another firefighter, setting down a broom, smiled and asked for a cup, too.

Tanya felt her face soften and smiled as she took another cup from the grocery cart, watching them drink the coffee she had made for them. But the police officers turned back to the victims, their uniformed backs barring her. She set her face again, furred brow, lip out. Why was everyone pushing her away?

"She was driving too fast," Tanya said. Once again everyone turned and looked at her. "I watched the whole thing from my window, and I could tell from there she was driving too fast." She nodded her head along as she spoke.

The woman looked at her, incredulous. "Are you kidding me?" she said.

"How fast?" asked Frank.

"Oh, I don't know. Fast."

Frank wrote something in his notebook. Then he took a cup from Tanya and said thanks. He indicated to the other police officers to take a cup, which they did. Tanya smiled again, looking around at her friends, even the man with the parka, appreciating what she'd done for them. But when her eyes met the woman's, she saw that her eyes had turned red, and she fixed a gaze on Tanya so very much like the look her mother used to give her, it caused her to jump back. The last cup of coffee, reserved for the woman, toppled in the cart, dripping a little from the spout in the lid. Tanya picked up the cup and poured the rest of the coffee out into the snow, staining it brown.

The woman turned her head and the sun glinted off a tear streaking down her cheek. Shame rose up again, and Tanya's throat tightened. She swallowed hard and shuffled back down the sidewalk pushing her grocery cart ahead of her.

Once home, she dumped the coffee from the pot down the sink. She yanked the corner of the quilt when it began to slip off her shoulders and put more coffee grounds in the coffee maker. She pressed the button to start the brewing. It was the woman's fault, she reasoned, not hers, for driving so fast on a snowy day. Tanya had an obligation to tell the truth if she saw it. But still, the woman's eyes haunted her. Accusatory. Hurt. As if Tanya had betrayed her. After all, weren't they kindred souls? Two black women in a sea of white? Didn't they have an obligation toward each other?

"All I did was offer her some coffee," she said to the crucifix on the wall.

The tiny Jesus stared at her with melancholy eyes.

"It wasn't my fault," she shouted to the little Jesus. She pushed out her bottom lip and gave the crucifix a nod as if ending an argument.

Later that same day, Tanya was in the living room watching a soap opera when she heard the squealing tires and shattering glass. Her heart skipped as she hurried to the kitchen window. Here was her chance to redeem herself from that terrible morning. God was giving her another chance. But when she peered out the window, her mouth fell open and her stomach dropped. This was a big one.

A school bus lie on its side, smoke slipping out of the hood. She jammed her feet into her slippers and hurried down the sidewalk, her

hands cold and empty at her sides. Her breath came out in little clouds, and she groaned at the sight ahead of her.

She crossed the intersection and saw people in their cars gaping. Some had their cell phones out as if taking pictures. She approached the toppled-over bus from the back where she bent down and stuck her face in the back hatch window. The window was full of mud and road salt, and she couldn't see anything, so she pulled down the sleeve of her sweater and wiped a strip of grime away. When she cupped her hands around her eyes, she could see inside.

Small children, elementary age, had been thrown from their seats, and were piled up on top of one another. Backpacks and lunch boxes were strewn everywhere. There were tennis-shoed feet sticking straight up in the air. There was little movement, and she thought she could hear faint cries from within. And there was blood, too, trickling down the faces of the children who were lying nearest her. She couldn't possibly have smelled it, but her nostrils filled with the iron smell of blood.

Her mind flashed images before her. She was sixteen again, blood trickling into the toilet, running down her leg, her uterus clamping down on her in protest. She gripped the bathroom counter and tried not to vomit from the pain in her abdomen and chest. After she had cleaned up the blood on her legs, and the bit that dripped onto the ceramic tile, she sat down on the couch, her mother tossing a quilt over her shoulders and thrusting a mug of coffee into her hands.

"There," her mother said, standing before her and looking down. "Now no one will know what a slut you are."

Young Tanya, no longer innocent, let the tears slide down her face and the coffee spill over the edge as her body shook from the rapid change in hormones. She turned away from her mother's scorn as she would later turn away from potential lovers. Because who could love her now that she'd done what she'd done? She would never walk down the center aisle at church in a wedding dress, white or otherwise. Her uterus, betrayed, would never bear her another child. The man, the one who called her "sugar," fled back to his wife and children, and she never heard from him again. Though for years she would lie in bed at night and imagine what her child would have looked like. Would it have had his golden eyes? Her smooth skin? Would she have bundled the baby in her arms and sung it lullabies to

fall asleep? She whispered the lullabies to herself instead, bundled herself in her bed.

Nausea overcame her now at the memories and she gagged. She stood back and took a deep breath. She held her hands out in front of her and took another step backward. Slowly, she inched away from the bus, shaking her head. *The children don't deserve this*, she thought. Sirens blared, coming nearer and nearer, echoing through her skull.

She'd tried to tell herself it wasn't her fault. She'd been young, and him so much older. Her mother so forceful and terrifying without ever having to raise a hand to her. And yet, whenever she found herself on the brink of letting someone into her life, she saw her mother's narrowed eyes and heard the words again, *Now no one will know what a slut you are*. She could hear her lover's voice on the other end of the phone when she told him about the pregnancy, *How do you even know it's mine?*

This accident, too, couldn't have been her fault, despite what she'd been hoping for after the incident with the woman earlier. She couldn't possibly bear so much guilt. She crossed the intersection and shuffled her way more quickly down the sidewalk away from the bus and the children. When she reached her house, she burst through the door, panting. The crucifix rattled on the wall.

She picked her quilt off the back of a kitchen chair and wrapped it around herself, then went for the can opener. She clicked it into a can, but didn't open it all the way. When the cat came dashing into the kitchen, she cornered him and scooped him into her arms. He barred his claws, but she let them dig into her skin. She stood and held him to her face, letting his body quake with hers as she cried into his fur. Soon, flashing red and blue lights filled her kitchen through the window, but still she clung to the cat, his claws digging into her arms, even after they drew blood, which trickled slowly down her arms and dripped onto the linoleum floor.