

Wet and Wounded

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The conditions that evening were ideal for a wreck. I was on my way home from wrestling practice, so I was exhausted. It was my first time trying wrestling and I was quickly discovering that the sport was more tiresome than dramatic despite what the World Wrestling Federation led me to believe. There was no high school league that involved signature moves, scantily clad women, and impressive outfits so I opted for the next best thing. Part of me had hoped that my days of Rock Bottoming kids on trampolines in elementary school would translate into real wrestling skills, but I digress.

Not only was I tired from practice, but it was raining. Actually it was more like monsooning. My wipers were on the “Poseidon, Please Spare Me” setting and still losing the battle against the tidal waves washing over my car. It was also dark, country dark. I lived in the middle of nowhere so street lights were nonexistent. The curvy backwoods road devoid of lighting, curbs, railings, or other safety precautions served as my path home.

My sixteen-year-old self did not have years of driving experience or formal training to rely on. I had something better-Bonnie Tyler. Something about blasting ‘Holding Out For A Hero’ always transformed me from an easily distracted teenager in an unimpressive ‘89 Mercury Sable to Jason Statham racing my Mercedes in the big chase scene in a movie. Except even more handsome.

So I’m winding through the storm-drenched darkness, guided by my harmonies with Ms. Tyler, and was finally getting close to the safety of my home. Suddenly, I saw headlights approaching. As they got closer it looked like the oncoming car was in the middle of the narrow two-lane highway. I waited for them to do the responsible thing and get reacquainted with their own lane, but it didn’t seem like that was going to happen. We finally passed on a sharp S curve. I tried to get over as far as possible to avoid hitting the car. I succeeded.

I also succeeded in sliding my car off of the road completely. About an inch off the side of the road, where a curb is normally located, there was instead a steep decline leading straight down into a quaint wooded area. As my car dropped so did my stomach. Instead of hitting the brakes as I was tossed about, I found the gas pedal. A moment later my front bumper found a tree.

Worse than the collision itself was the split second “...this should be unpleasant” moment before impact. Predicting how much pain you are about to experience is so much worse than the sensation itself. Our imaginations are vivid and powerful things, and mine is especially cruel at times.

At last I reached impact. I threw my hands up to cover my face so I could at least die with minimal ugliness. My car collided with a tree and everything surged forward. My shielded face collided with the steering wheel, my legs hammered into that area above the pedals but below the steering wheel that I don’t think anyone has come up with a good

name for yet, and my seatbelt snapped me back into my seat and luckily prevented me from flying through my windshield and into the tree. The poor thing had enough damage from my car and I can only imagine how many more trees would have been destroyed by my rock-solid physique hurtling through the woods like a cannonball. Despite what I believed would happen moments before, I did not die on impact.

As soon as I realized that I had cheated death, I also came to the conclusion that I had mere seconds to enjoy it. Mostly because I was not breathing. I gasped harder than my grandma at an Eddie Murphy joke, but to no avail. My lungs had obviously popped and now I was going to suffocate and die a miserable and painful death. For some reason, the only viable option at that point seemed to be to escape the car as if all the oxygen was outside, and if I could just get to it I could breathe again. I ripped my seatbelt off, opened the door, and allowed myself to fall into the mud like a sack of bricks.

I lay there struggling to breathe for about ten minutes. (Later on at the hospital, the doctor would tell me I would have died if I really wasn't breathing that long, and I more than likely only struggled for a few seconds. But what does he know?) While I was sprawled out in the muck taking chaotic curt breaths, I found myself not actually fearing the death that I believed was drawing near. Instead I just imagined other people's reactions to my death. More specifically I envisioned the scene of my body being discovered. It would have been pretty dramatic. My bloodied broken body half-concealed in the swampy earth, the hunk of scrap metal that was my car sitting idly by, rain relentlessly assaulting everything below.

Amidst this morbid daydream I found myself suddenly sucking in sweet air. I was going to live. I sluggishly pushed myself to my feet. As I stood up I realized that my knee was throbbing. Likely broken. I would never be a dancer now. I then became aware of the smoke billowing from the hood of my car. I had survived the impact just to be killed in an explosion right after. While that would be a rad way to die, I still had stuff to do so I needed to live. I figured if I took the keys out of my car and turned it off it couldn't explode. The science is questionable on that, but at the time it seemed to make sense. In a daze I pulled myself to my feet and navigated the twisted wreckage to remove the keys. While I was already inside what was left of my car I decided to retrieve the other essentials.

I gathered my keys, wallet, and phone, the Holy Trinity of men's necessities, and then began pondering my next step. Everything had been some surreal instinctual experience up until this point, and now I was at a loss as to what I was supposed to do. My answer came to me as a car stopped at the top of the hill I had plummeted from. A man braved the rain to call out to me.

"Are you okay?!"

"...No," was all I could muster.

My breath was still extremely shallow and speaking in complete sentences was impossible. I don't remember exactly how our conversation went after that, but we somehow determined that he was going to drive me to my home, which was less than a mile away. As I struggled up the hill with his aid I found myself in another sort of out-of-body cinematic scenario. Once I made it to his car, I locked eyes with a young boy sitting in

the back seat. I imagined the encounter from his point of view. Some ragged and bloody stranger lurching out of the rain and towards him. I imagined how funny it would have been if I gave him a deranged look or drug my thumb across my throat in a menacing manner. Luckily for him, I refrained and simply sat in the passenger seat and told the man the name of my street.

I wanted to apologize for dirtying the inside of his car, but I was still struggling to breathe normally. On the drive I tried to self-diagnose my injuries. My knee was surely broken. My face got personal with the steering wheel, so I assumed I resembled the victim of a botched plastic surgery. I wasn't sure if something happened to my lungs or if I had reached a whole new level of getting the wind knocked out of me. While it seemed like I might live after all, I assumed it would be as a hideous cripple.

After a couple of minutes we arrived at my house, and I was helped through my back door where I took a seat at the kitchen table.

"Mom!" I managed to yell.

No response.

"Mom!" This time I built up my strength and managed to make it more audible.

"WHAT?!" was the response I received from across the house.

"Mom!" One last time as I was now officially out of breath again.

"I told you not to do that! I hate that so much. If you want something, just come to me instead of yelling across the house."

The man looked at me in despair and offered to go get my mother for me. I shook my head and managed a weak chuckle.

"What do you want anyway? Why couldn't you just come downstairs and—oh!"

She froze as she entered the kitchen. Her expression was priceless as she saw her son clearly suffering from serious injuries and a complete stranger standing in her home. That moment was almost worth smashing my car into a tree for.