

Impact

By Lynn Jatania

This is how it happens. Your mind wanders for a moment and there's a screech of tires, a crunch of metal on metal, mechanical beasts meeting where meeting was never meant to happen. The smell of gasoline and sulphur and melting plastic, the peace of knowing the waiting is over, it is done.

Leah always knew a fiery car crash lay at the end of the road for her, like some people know they're going to be a ballerina or going to be tall or going to need braces down the line. It was who she was, a part of her being. When she saw cars exploding on cheesy cop shows on TV, it was like seeing her own future.

She'd grown resigned to it over the years. You can only live with a dagger hanging over your head for so long before it begins to feel normal, like another arm or an extra kidney. Life goes on, and you wait but not-wait, learn to ignore your fate except in dreams.

And of course, when faced with getting in a car.

Every swim lesson, every trip to the mall for new shoes, she'd ride in the backseat, picturing it all playing out in her mind. The crumple of the doors as they imploded, the pop-pop of airbags bursting outwards, forces working at odds for maximum destruction. The first flickers of flame licking at her feet like a familiar pet dog, the warmth of inevitability curling around her like a cozy blanket. It was comforting, almost – her one sadness being the thought of her mother, or her friends in the Girl Guide carpool, or her grandparents taking her to Sunday brunch, ending up wrongfully destroyed, lost by genuine accident of passenger proximity.

So as soon as she was able, she began to assert her independence. First by foot, begging to be allowed to walk herself to Mandy's eleventh birthday party even though it was a whole school district away. Then by bike, cycling herself to school even on the rainiest of days, even if it meant being late, even if it meant balancing the wigwam she'd built for social studies on the handlebars with both hands while steering using her knees and some carefully orchestrated leaning. She took the school bus to high school, city buses to the movies with friends – somehow buses never seemed to be a threat, didn't fit the final tableau that lived in her mind.

And as soon as she turned 16, she learned to drive. There were times, without question, when travelling by car was going to be unavoidable - swim meets a town or two over, senior year field trip to the beach at the Provincial Park - and she determined she'd be alone in the car, putting no one at risk but herself, valiantly saving her loved ones (and taxi drivers) from a disaster that only she could foresee. So she got herself a license – every second of lessons feeling like shaking hands with the devil, every moment feeling the tiger at her back looking at her instructor like a tasty appetizer. She cried with relief when awarded the little square of plastic at the bureau – you didn't have to look too closely to see red eyes in her photo. She was now able to take her fate into her own hands.

It was the August she turned 20 when Kate came to ask for the favour. Her younger sister – “Why can’t you be more cheerful like Kate?” – was moving across the island to Charlottetown for university. Leah hadn’t gone herself – it wasn’t that it seemed pointless, because really, she could have years ahead of her, but she was happy in Sunnyside, genuinely liked her job at the bookstore, and although she didn’t feel safe, exactly, she felt the ease of daily life where everything (except one thing) was a known, the solace in the idea that her last moments would be in a place that felt like home. The routine and the familiarity blended into a comforting monochrome background.

Kate’s plan was to rent a moving truck – she’d be living off campus with her boyfriend for first year, an idea that no one in the family supported in any way, but no one says no to Kate. She had a sunny, bubbly way about her – *carefree*, Leah used to think with only a trace of bitterness in her mind – that was delightfully infectious. She and Josh had excitedly overbought a bunch of IKEA furniture at garage sales, enough to furnish two or three apartments, especially considering the space they could afford. Josh would drive the truck, Kate would bring along his car piled high with breakables, and Leah’s job would be just to follow the parade in Kate’s car, a long-haul shipping job that Kate would repay in coffee, donuts, and a fun girls’ night out in Charlottetown when they arrived. “Come on, Leah – it’ll be fun. You could use a little fun,” Kate teased.

Sigh. No one says no to Kate.

They hit the highway on a cloudy and grey Saturday morning, first Kate, then Josh, then Leah tagging along at the back, like a dog’s tail between its legs. It was almost comical, Leah thought, the way her knuckles literally went white as they gripped the steering wheel, the way she ramped the wipers up to max when nothing more than a sprinkle hit the windshield. Every roadside cemetery – why were there so many? – invited her to come in and stay a while. Soon her plodding pace had put her well behind the others, and she was alone on the road.

This is how it happens. A red car comes towards you, a small two-door model, red cars being the most likely to get into an accident and so the colour sets your teeth on edge, involuntarily. There’s a thin layer of water on the road and even as you grip the wheel so tightly you can barely feel your fingers, the tires lose their grasp on the road and your car begins to slide sideways. The red car comes closer and you brake but cannot stop and there is a bang - the bang you always heard in your head is so much louder when it happens in real life - and everything comes to a slow-motion stop and there is no control, not even the illusion of control, you are just along for the ride, a bystander watching it all play out.

Leah sat dazed behind the wheel – the airbag, where was the airbag? It hadn’t gone off. A rap on the window – she looked up, startled to see the face of a rather ordinary young man where the Grim Reaper ought to have been standing. “Are you alright?” he called through the patter of rain, his short brown hair slicking down quickly, and she called back, “Fine!” – social niceties answering the question by default but failing utterly to capture the fizzy feeling rising in her belly, overflowing like a warm Coke poured into a cold glass. She was alive. It had happened, and yet she lived, whether a dream or reality she didn’t care, she only wanted to be here in the rain with this stranger and his red car and no airbags and glorious, glorious life.

Leah got out of the car and felt cool drops on her cheeks, smelled the rain-and-grass smell all around her, felt warm despite the dampness. She let him do the talking, taking down her information, leaving her his info on the back of a business card – his name was Davyd, he apologized on his parents' behalf for the awkward spelling.

Had the trees always been so green?

He talked on, somewhere around the edge of hearing. She had a dent in the passenger side door and a broken mirror that was probably going to cost a couple of thousand dollars, he said. He had a rather sad looking fender and a bit of a sore shoulder where the seat belt had snapped to attention.

Was the sky always so vast, so beautiful in swirls of grey and blue and white?

No need to call the police, he suggested, she agreed, her voice murmuring from somewhere far away.

Had the breeze always brushed against her skin just so, like the caresses of a pixie, the soft stroke of a spirit just barely out of sight?

“Are you okay to go on?” he asked, “You seem a little numb.”

She laughed out loud. “Anything but.” Numb, no. Crazy, possibly. Awake, yes.

She took a deep breath, felt life rush into her lungs. The road was wide open ahead of her, and she was looking forward to the drive.