

Luck

written by Guest Contributor | December 12, 2019



Image Credit: Amy Touchette

To My Fourteen-Year-Old Self

You were in luck; you were saved. You were in the ambulance. Under the buzzing, white-hot gaze of the overhead light. You were beside an EMT, whose mouth was moving and then whose voice made its way into your head. *Shh*. Then, *Breathe. I know it's tough*.

You looked up at the eye of the bulb glaring above you. And thought about god. Then you forced yourself to stop crying and to move your ribs slower, so that the EMT could check your breath, take your pulse, and assess your wounds.

You were in luck; you were saved. You had been on the roadside. Next to the ditch filled with swamp lilies, rotting in the end-of-summer sun. You were in luck. The EMT said nothing had been broken. Your skin would grow back. You were saved. Because you were fourteen, it was your birthday, and you still believed in being saved.

You had been on the roadside. Your knuckles torn and dotted with blood. And in moments, the blood flowed enough to cover your fingers, trickled down your wrists and pooled in your palms. And while you screamed, your stepfather got out of the driver's seat and walked to the end of the car. The passenger door where you had jumped was still swinging open. He sat on the back bumper and took out a pack of cigarettes. Inhaled, breathed out gray, and asked, *You okay?* The tiny point burned between his fingers.

You were in luck; you were okay. You were saved because it was morning. Because there were summer sprinklers on the lawn, kids running back and forth on matted wet grass. You were saved because older kids stared, riding by on bikes. You were saved because how could the cattails allow you to be alone

when they swayed together in secret hymns? You were saved because your scream was louder than the noise of the children. Your scream was loud enough to make it into your cousin's house where you had just had a sleepover and where your aunt was already in the shower getting ready for the day. Loud enough for your hungover uncle to pull himself off the couch, run in his boxers out of the house, down to the road. And even in his mind boggled from Vietnam PTSD and endless drinking, even he, because it was too early for anything other than clarity, even he shouted, *What did you do to her?* at your stepfather. Then he came over to you and asked, *What do you want me to do to him? Do you want me to call the police?*

And no matter what: You were saved because you can always remember those words.

Were you saved? Were you safe? When the EMTs came, the first thing they did was put you on a bed and slide you into an ambulance. You were transferred from the ambulance to a hallway to a room in a hospital. Someone cleaned your wounds, the skin that the road had shaved off your right leg, from your knee down to your toes, and your summer shoe, some sort of strappy sandal, had fallen off.

And now there were police.

You were in the car. Yes. Who was driving? What happened?

He was driving in the wrong lane. A truck was coming.

What did he do?

Nothing. I told him a truck was coming.

Did he hear you?

I didn't know. So I told him a truck was coming again. But he stayed in the wrong lane. Then that truck pulled away, and behind it, there was another car coming down the road, too.

Miss, are you sure? Do you think he had a reason?

Yes, I'm sure. He does stuff like this ... It's my birthday. He always does something on important days.

What happened next?

I grabbed the wheel of the car, to pull us into the correct lane. But then he hit me.

Miss, can you describe this? Did he use a flat hand or a fist?

A fist.

Okay, so just to clarify, do you mean he punched you or more like he pushed you and just happened to have his hand closed?

No, I mean he punched me, with a fist. And he hit me in the chest.

Not in the face? So you were saying he punched you, but you don't mean in the face?

Yes, in the chest.

Can you show me?

Yes, right here, over the heart, just above my left breast.

Miss, can you describe this?

Can you think of why he would do that? Hit you in the chest? Because, well, that is strange. Most people, when they hit, hit in the face. Can you think of a reason he might have had?

I don't know. But it reminded me of that kid. He'd been telling me about that kid, the one in the news who died recently when a ball hit him in the chest.

So wait a minute, are you saying this was premeditated?

Yes.

Miss, I don't think this could possibly be premeditated. Do you think perhaps he was just shocked because you'd grabbed the wheel? Are you absolutely sure he used a fist? You want me to write that down? A lot of things were going on. Think. Are you absolutely sure that is how he hit you?

Yes, he used a fist. And then I freaked out. I didn't want to be alone with him for the ride home. I checked the speedometer, and we were going pretty slow, so I figured I could jump.

Wait, you jumped? Are you saying you jumped out of the moving car? Miss, you said that after you turned the wheel, the car was in the right lane. Why would you jump when you said the car was in the correct lane?

I couldn't be in the car with him for the rest of the ride home. We were leaving my uncle's house and we live far away. I didn't know what else he would do. So then I jumped.

Okay, just to confirm: You jumped?

Yes, I jumped.

And then as you lay there, your skin ringing like a gong, the pulse of your heart felt in your knuckles, your legs, you hear the officer who has walked away and is now in the hallway say to another person, *Jesus Christ, she says she chose to jump after the car was in the correct lane.* And then another officer enters your room.

You were in luck.

This officer says, *Tell me again.* And so you do. This officer asks new

questions. *Miss, the road you were on was not a highway, that truck could not have been driving very fast. What compelled you to grab the wheel of the car? Don't you think your stepfather knew what he was doing?*

This officer says, *Miss, do you have a driver's license?*

The officer's walkie-talkie steams with static, then stops. You say: *I would like to press charges.* The officer doesn't move to get a notepad but remains still. You say: *Because he hit me.* And the officer informs you that your stepfather is also pressing charges, against you. *How would you like to answer those charges?* And you are sloshing with self-loathing, and you wish you could twist yourself like a kitchen towel. Wring yourself out. What were you? Were you wrong? Was that what you were? Wrong. Just wrong all the way through. Wasn't it enough that there was a truck coming? Perhaps it wasn't. Now suddenly, you are deeply unsure.

You. You were. You were in the hospital. The cops were bored, and walked back and forth in the hall. A nurse was at your bedside. The bowl filled with tiny rocks and bits of asphalt and tar, like a nest of dead bird eggs. You heard each ping into the metal bowl. You looked at her. You watched. You did not feel a thing. You did not know why. You wanted her to look up at you. She did not. And when she was done, she sighed. Swabbed you down with another layer of iodine. Lugged the bowl out with her.

When your momma arrived and you saw her in the doorway to your hospital room, it was like you didn't know how much you had wanted her. Like a child at the end of the first day of school. Like a toddler lost at the mall. She came closer and pulled up a chair. She was soft, round, her lap. Just the simple warmth of her, and you began to cry. She had been crying, too. Her eyes dark, her voice thick and caught. She slipped her nails through your long hair, and whispered into your ear, *I just want you to know, I would have done the same thing.*

And for a moment, you felt like an old stone statue, all the pigeons lifting off into the sky. What relief. Because you thought she meant she would have jumped too. But then she continued, *If you ever grab the wheel of my car, I would hit you, too.* And then she was done, stiff and upright in the visitor's chair, her hand unmoving on your back. You were in luck. You were saved. You were infused with uncertainty. You were a beaker holding a whisp of smoke. You were a ball of black tar and unyielding any impressions. And now something you wanted had been taken away, and you would be left wanting it for years to come.



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