

The Sisyphus Effect

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I'm already late and the car is rasping and heaving to turn the engine over, the clouds tell me I will wish my umbrella weren't on my kitchen table; phone, *check*, notes, *check*, my meeting starts in forty minutes and the construction on 224 will hold me up for ten. Damn it, where is my ID? In my bag. In my bag? Yes.

The car shifts into a pattering rumble, gummily peels away from the curb, and the light is gre—it's yellow, I can make it...on a red. Fists clenching, unclenching, I merge onto the uncongealed highway, no turn signal and no one cares because they don't use it either. Traffic cones litter the road and the cars clot in the right lane; speedometer at 67...43...2. Heaven roars in indignation, settles. Driver's chair moans as I sink back, hands melt from steering wheel, foot resigns itself to hold the brake: inches pile into eighth-miles, fourth-miles, half-miles. Twenty-seven minutes to the meeting, well, there's no use worrying about it in construction—seriously, twenty-seven minutes? Should've grabbed the umbrella, I still have twenty-seven.

Silence trapped in the cab, harmonized by a rattling diminuendo deep in the A/C, whispering against the windows—a suction of air mauls quiet into chaos. Passenger door's open and a corpse is in the cockpit: skin and bones, draped in black; amethyst knuckles, jaundice fingertips. Hands on the wheel, leaning forward, straining, sputtering—in a rush—threw notes into the car—didn't lock the door—

"What the hell?" Civilians shouldn't be allowed in work zones, hitchhikers shouldn't be allowed in work zones.

She offers an unhurried glance with eyes framed by kohl and lack of sleep, Band-Aid fingers crunching into a fist around a cigarette, storm clouds pouring from her mouth. A/C whines, door shuts.

"Get out of the car—" bullet words, shoot to kill.

Smog rolls on the ceiling; get out of the car get out of the car get out of my car—

"Drive," desperate pulls on the cigarette and eyes heavy-lidded, feral.

An invective forms on my tongue, rolls onto my teeth: ready, aim—

A horn screams behind me; I jolt—End Construction Zone, Speed Limit 60, nineteen minutes, I didn't have time for the umbrella. Hands fly in aborted gestures, curse lingers over the center storage console, I floor the gas.

"I'm only going to 6th Street; you're getting out there."

"I'm only going as far as you are."

Speedometer at twentyfortyfivesixtyeightseventytwo and a storm is cumulating under the roof, fourteen minutes, get out of my car, twelve minutes; feral eyes forward, a flare of red—

Cacophony of metal, woodwind of glass, twist of rust, percussion of bone.

A meaningless mirage of sound, sharp light pulsing and black holes swallowing my vision as they shovel me off the ground. A glimpse of death—thin and broken, upside down, eternal sleep clouding insomnia eyes; mangled ribs and split lips and the blood crawls from her temple across stained hair and past the cloven crown, dripping off the broken pieces of an incomplete halo around her head. Smoke curls from fire

crushed between fingers.

—I open my eyes and they water; a tentative sniff and my nose burns, assaulted with sterility and stale oxygen. Language assembles and I match it with a uniform: blue and white, clipboard, stethoscope.

Her words curl through my ears: collision, concussion, safe, miracle, miracle—
 “—hiker,” my voice is tinted with sandpaper; jigsaw-grammar sentences.
 “—ssenger, she—” My kingdom for a glass of water.

A smile peeks through her concern because that will be the concussion, I’m confused, a guardian angel caught me and I’m safe; I’m on medication and don’t worry they have my phone, my wallet, my notes, my book, my book? They have my umbrella. It isn’t bent; of course not, it’s on the kitchen table. I must be confused. I don’t have a book. She leaves; I scrabble for the bedside table—ripple of paper, crest of leather, pull it towards me. Thumb skips over ridge of pages, each one rises in an arc and falls left; meandering rows of doctor’s font, list after list after list of names and descriptions: Rebekah Bosworth, smallpox, Luke Kendall, bullet, Esther Hill, overdose—names, struck through with a black line. Pages losing age spots, straightening dog-ears and uncurling water damage; the book is too small for these thousands of pages, and the strikeouts end.

Backtrack—past Leah Nguyen, heart attack, Noah Sorenson, base jumping—
 And me.

Me, car accident. Image blisters against the stark white, my brain tumbles, it’s the concussion, I’m confused, I forgot my umbrella, me, car accident. Me; the book is ripped away with yellow fingers. She stands over me, bony and not broken, fingers still caging a misty cigarette; head bows towards the open book and she clamps her smoke in her teeth, draws pen from pocket, draws a line. ~~Me. Car accident.~~

Feral eyes level against mine, worn, defeated, a glimmer of revulsion. It fades: I have been crossed off of the to-do list. She turns, spits smoke; I can still see the curved stain of blood around her head reaching towards impossible completion. Divinity, interrupted.

Cigarette falling to the floor, ash dusting the tile, flame fighting its demise—I watch it go out, a door opens and ushers in a patter of feet, a distant telephone.

—the umbrella is on the bedside table.

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight...there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor.

Albert Camus, “The Myth of Sisyphus”