

Closer

by

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All Martin saw, before he smashed into the rear-end of the Volvo wagon, was a flash of words – *I Brake for Moose*. Then, a roaring sound of the impact threw him forward into the spraying glass. The airbag blinded him for a moment. The hood of the car folded and crunched like stiff navy blue construction paper.

Silence held him frozen in time for a few moments. Dead, paralyzed? The dense fog muted everything. He touched his face and felt bits of glass stuck to his skin, imbedded. He pulled one out and saw the blood. Fluids and steam poured from his car. Visibility was down to less than fifty feet. At fifty-five miles an hour, he never had a chance to move his foot from the gas pedal to the brake. It was still resting on the gas pedal waiting to go forward. Martin unbuckled his seatbelt and pushed open his door. It didn't open easily, which made him think that the whole frame of his car was bent, which meant his car was totaled. But, his body was moving and nothing felt broken or fractured. His suit jacket was burned from the airbag. His chest burned and ached from the seatbelt holding him back during impact.

He stepped out onto the highway. The wet air and the dense fog permeated his clothes like heavy smoke. The highway was greasy and wet, with antifreeze green and rusty brown under foot. He walked down to the nose of his car, which was now horribly disfigured. The radiator let out ghostly spirits. The back of the car he hit, a Volvo Crossroad Wagon, was caved in from the middle of the car to the right taillight. The back

wheel on the right side was twisted upward. The license plate was wrapped into the wreckage like a pasted label; most of the bumper was gone. The car must have slid twenty feet from the impact. A piece of plastic, shattered and tossed into the dirt on the roadside marked the words... *I Brake*... but that was all he could make out.

He walked down the side of the smashed car. He feared that someone was inside, smashed and broken like the back of the twisted wreckage. The front was smashed in, too, like his car. She must have hit something before he rear-ended her. He looked through the wet window. He couldn't see in until he wiped the moisture off - there was no one in the car. He sighed, "At least I didn't kill anyone." He opened the door and looked around. Inside, the contents looked jumbled, but he couldn't tell if it had always been that way - or if it was damage from the accident. On the passenger's seat sat a woman's purse spilled over. He put his hand on the bag. Maybe a cell-phone to call the police? Maybe an I.D.?

Voices called from the fog - stay back, stay away - but it was ringing in his ears. The car smelled of perfume and burnt coffee. He found the coffee splattered across the dashboard in milky brown smears. Where is this lady? A lipstick was on the seat with a silk scarf. He touched it - soft and dry. He put it to his nose - it smelled like lilac and hairspray. It stirred loneliness in him, never settling. He looked between the seats to the back. No one in the back - she was gone. There was an open duffel bag with soccer gear overflowing across the seat. Next to that was the distinct plastic shape of a violin case. Must be kids, he thought. Where are they?

He flipped open the console between the two-bucket seats. On top were a Billy Joel disk and a James Taylor cassette wedge in place by a .32 pistol. No case or lock on it - just a gun.

Suddenly, the voices came back – move off the goddamn highway... you're gonna get killed... and then they faded. They're coming. She's gonna see me in the car. She'll shoot me, he thought.

A woman was approaching out of the mist. He took the gun in his hand and pulled his body out of the car. He held it close. The open door concealed it.

“Hey – are you alright?”

Martin looked at her brown hair, bouncing on her shoulders, her coat flaring out like a satin cape. Her lips were colored with a crimson red and her glasses were delicate and fragile, balanced on her nose. They didn't break in the accident. Her thin legs whispered along in her slacks and her heels clattered on the pavement. She was yelling to him, “It's the fog... its really bad – we're part of a fourteen car pile up....”

Was it Marie? Martin thought for sure it was his old girlfriend... the one who left him for that fireman after 9/11. No, not Marie, but like that woman he met at the Home Expo, the one who smiled at him by the Vinyl siding display.

No, she was a woman he'd seen in the newspaper – a lawyer, someone who had a powerful job. He knew her – when he saw her picture in the paper he thought she was a looker, sophisticated. He knew her from somewhere.

“You should get off the highway before another car comes and plows into our cars. It's a mess. Someone down the road is trapped in his car and there's a fire at the

front. You have to get off the highway before you get killed! Everyone is wrecking – a chain reaction!”

He shut the door and began moving toward her. He wanted to rush in and draw closer to see her. He knew her, but from where... damn. Closer.

As she made it to the front of her car, her concerned, pretty face noticed the gun in his hand.

She looked aghast as she spun away; sure he was going to kill her. Martin drew up his hands with surprise, the gun waving in the air - no closer, come closer. She turned in a swirl of flesh and cloth and spun out into the highway. Her coat swirled in a perfect circle around her, her shoes tapping out steps.

He blurted out what his mind couldn't think – “Wait – I want to know you!” Spinning away from the man with her gun, a bright light drew down on her navy blue coat. In a moment, a semi-truck caught her in the chest – the right fender pushing her chin up and away – her delicate glasses spinning into the weeds. She disappeared under the truck with a shudder. The truck then plowed into a pick-up truck another forty feet down the highway; jack knifed and caught on fire.

The rush of air swirled by Martin as let the gun fall to the ground with a metal clack. Someone came from the fog on the other side of the car, “Hey, buddy – do you see that truck, it just plowed into a car down there. You better get off the highway. You're gonna get killed.”

Martin turned and moved off with the shadowy man. He took a breath. “I couldn't see anything. I rear ended this car, but I don't know where the driver is,” said Martin.

The man pulled him by his sleeve, leading him into the muddy field, “I’m sure they’re out of the way.”

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