

## Rumble Strip

They drove in silence. Threading south through the congested arteries of the aging Detroit-Metro freeway system, he noticed the silence waking, stretching, filling the cab of the small truck.<sup>1</sup> There are so many kinds of silence, and their two individual silences mingled in the absence of music or chatter from the stereo.<sup>2</sup>

His began as self-aware, almost guilty.<sup>3</sup> He knew from the marriage he had given up on that silence could be treacherous.<sup>4</sup> There seemed to be a point beyond which it hardened and became brittle, and to break it was to accept the violence of its shattering. Also though, he welcomed the quiet. He was used to driving in silence,<sup>5</sup> and it got his mind

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<sup>1</sup> A black 1996 Dodge Dakota, a model notorious amongst truck guys for electrical problems. The stereo had quit working, and though Brett took the dashboard off over three years ago, he has yet to attempt to fix or replace the radio.

<sup>2</sup> It started with a headlight dimmer switch, which had begun smoking one night on the way to work. He replaced that but is pretty sure that in doing so, he somehow killed the radio, which has not worked since.

<sup>3</sup> Brett often feels guilty for things he might have done, and things he knows he did, but that no one could possibly know about, least of all her, unless he talks in his sleep, which he is reasonably sure he doesn't do, since his first wife was a light sleeper, and would surely have let him know, in her own special way, that he was disturbing her.

<sup>4</sup> Madison had been three years younger than him, and chemically imbalanced. Her silences had alternated with bouts of tears and banshee rages. They had agreed to get a divorce two weeks after their wedding day, after she admitted to sleeping with a guy from work in the stockroom. Even now, imagined scenes of their sweaty humping amidst the pallets of Sunny Delight and Bareman's Half & Half come to him unbidden, accompanied by a sudden sharp twist of his stomach. After four years grooming racehorses, it amuses him to think of these cramps as bouts of colic.

<sup>5</sup> [See also footnotes 1 and 2] He was a bachelor when the radio conked out, and for as long as Khalen has known him, he has driven in silence, with his dashboard laying in the open bed of the truck getting skuzzier and more faded every day.

working.<sup>6</sup> He respected her for the guileless way she gave the silence space, seemingly unaware of its spreading out around and between them.<sup>7</sup> Her curls made the words “spun sunshine” run through his mind when she turned to look out her window, and he smiled a little at the weight of the unspoken phrase on his tongue.<sup>8</sup> The tired four-cylinder hummed along in fifth gear, bleeding speed on inclines and then racing downhill.<sup>9</sup> The joints in the highway thumped at the tires like a heartbeat.<sup>10</sup>

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She has not yet connected this aberration in his otherwise exemplary character with the procrastination which so drove his ex-wife crazy.

<sup>6</sup> It is important for him to do things which “get his mind working,” as he fancies himself an author. He writes strangely melodramatic horror stories often centered on characters who are also writers. Khalen sees a direct link between each successive book he reads — most often by King, Cussler, or Koontz — and each “new idea” he has. He usually tells her the plot of whatever he is reading several times, and yet he seems entirely unaware of how similar his “new ideas” are to those same books. She finds this troubling, but she hopes it is only a phase and that with time it will pass. She is terribly optimistic, almost saintly in her faith in humankind, and in him in particular. This optimism is surprising, considering the state of her family life during the year and a half before she moved in with Brett.

<sup>7</sup> Khalen is not, in fact, unaware of the silence — she simply prefers it to pointless chattering. Her mother is a chatterer, and it has always gotten on her nerves. In all fairness, her mother has every right to be wary of silences, as they often mark a shift in her husband’s capricious moods.

<sup>8</sup> Brett is deeply in love with Khalen, and she knows this. She loves him back, as fully as she can, though never having been in love before, she cannot be absolutely sure. Following this line of thought might lead her to wonder if she will *ever* know for sure until she falls in love with someone else.

<sup>9</sup> This truck, purchased for \$11,499.00 in Kentucky before his marriage, managed to pull a three-thousand pound trailer from Soo St. Marie, Michigan, to Bellingham, Washington, when he and Madison had left Kentucky in late August four years ago to “try someplace new,” as she had put it when she suggested the idea following the wedding. It was not until

Her silence had settled over her shoulders like a sleeping cat, and the pressure made her eyes ache a bit as she stared ahead toward the city. But it was the ache of some almost-pleasure, and the silence eased something in her as she let her mind wander across open spaces where subdivisions multiplied like toadstools.<sup>11</sup> She was acutely aware of him

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they had completed the grueling week-long cross-country drive without AC that she revealed to him that she had repeatedly fucked her coworker, Bill [see footnote 3], in the stockroom at Kroger. With over two-thousand miles between them and family he did not have the heart (because she had torn it out and tapdanced on it) to kick her out [of the truck — see endnote A]. So they hung on for four more months, disliking each other but still fucking regularly until he got laid off and began wetting the bed. He is not sure, but he thinks stress can cause a regression into childhood dysfunction [see endnote B]. In a possibly related regression, he came home after his first night of work at a local grocery store sobbing that he just wanted to go home. So they did: they crossed the Cascades in mid-December, nearly losing each other several times on icy passes and slushy plains. They were divorced as soon as the paperwork could be processed. They had nothing much, so there was nothing much to divide.

<sup>10</sup> It was not until later that Brett learned that Madison had been pregnant prior to the divorce. She called him one sunny January morning, when the light reflecting off the snow made it too bright to look out the window. She'd just had an abortion, she said. You were pregnant, he asked? Yes, she said, but it's over now. He didn't ask her if she knew who the father had been — or rather — would have been. He said the things that seemed appropriate in such a situation, and then they said goodbye. He often morbidly wonders about the remains. Do they bury it or burn it? If they buried it, it's conceivable, he sometimes muses, that he could find where it was interred and disinter it. Then its DNA could be tested, and he would know one way or the other if it was right to hate the cunt who ruined his life and killed his baby. Other times he imagines finding out that it was not his, and that he might hunt down that ignorant prick at the Lexington Kroger and beat him to death with a crow-bar in the stockroom for impregnating his [ex-]wife.

<sup>11</sup> When Khalen's mind wanders, it most often stays on well-

beside her, an arm's length away, and yet she avoided looking over at him, knowing that if she did, he would smile, perhaps touch her leg, brushing the ridges of her corduroys.<sup>12</sup> She looked away, not to keep him from touching her, but to extend that exquisite moment of equipoise for as long as possible.<sup>13</sup>

Silence always ends, though — if it didn't, we wouldn't need to name it. Theirs ended when they pulled off the highway and turned onto Woodward, heading south into Downtown.<sup>14</sup>

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worn and comfortable paths, avoiding those dark and tangled places where the trees crowd in to tear at one's clothing. When it does stray down one of these paths, she often gives a little shake of her head, joggling it back on course. Brett has noticed this tic, and thinks it is a sign of how proud she is of her beautiful curly hair. It is beautiful. *He's* proud of her beautiful hair.

<sup>12</sup> Khalen's mother had forbidden her from wearing shorts or skirts for most of her childhood, and still, jeans and corduroys make up the bulk of her lower-extremity wardrobe. Her mother had feared that Khalen would attract the wrong kind of attention, the kind which led to trees tugging at a young girl's clothing.

<sup>13</sup> She has become adept at looking away without seeming to. Most of her communication with her parents lately has consisted of avoiding meeting their eyes. When Khalen was younger, it had never been like that. Whatever happened had begun in her senior year, a while after spring break. Her father had suddenly grown edgy, and her mother even chattier than usual. She still wondered what it was all about. But aside from a single bizarre exchange with her father [see endnote D], she'd never found out for sure what had happened [see endnote C].

<sup>14</sup> Brett has asked her to come on this drive, into the city. Khalen knows makes him uncomfortable, but he has not yet told her the reason. She suspects that they might be going to the Chris Rock show at the Fox, but she does not want to get her hopes up. She has contemplated for an instant something even more exciting, but *that* is out of the question. Isn't it? She refuses to think about it, though she gets a fizzy thrill in her stomach and chest whenever she does. The sight of the gigantic church across from the exit ramp gave her another of those thrills.

“Can you believe all of these old churches?” He craned his neck to see the top of the Ethiopian Orthodox church across the street.

“Almost as many of them as there are porn shops.” She pointed at yet another low cinder-block shoe-box with blacked windows and gaudy neon signs.<sup>15</sup>

He nodded. Traffic was heavy, but not frantic as it would be in two hours, when those employers who hadn’t *yet* relocated overseas or down south cranked open the derelict floodgates, and the suburban workforce poured out of the city.<sup>16</sup> By then he hoped to be parked at the Renaissance Center and safely ensconced in a dim booth at The Pegasus.<sup>17</sup>

They both watched the countless gothic churches, like bankrupt cathedrals, some with handwritten signs proclaiming their current denomination and meeting times. Finally the road bumped from broken blacktop to cobblestones — an endless rumble strip that welcomed them into the eerily quiet heart of that old and wounded city.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Saying this makes Khaleen blush, but he is not good at noticing such subtle changes in complexion. He is red-green colorblind, and she enjoys teasing him about this fact. She blushes because the word “porn” reminds her of a nagging suspicion she has concerning the source of the troubling tension in her parents’ home [see endnote D].

<sup>16</sup> Much of Brett’s family comes from Detroit, Royal Oak actually, so he grew up visiting them. But this is the first time he has personally driven into the Motor City, and it terrifies him. He hates driving actually, is burned out on it, and he never feels right in any city. But this is different: he has plans, and they are nearing fruition. He is, however, also nervous about taking cabs and he hopes that the People-Mover can get them to Greektown and back. He recalls the grimy cabs he rode in when his father had brought him and his best friend here for a Piston’s game and an evening of blues at The Soup Kitchen. He also recalls the wild yelling of the homeless man they’d passed in the street, drunk before ten, and most likely afflicted with Tourette’s.

<sup>17</sup> They ate at The Pegasus once on that trip and Brett remembers the atmosphere to be romantic, and the Greek cuisine the best he has ever tasted. If not for the show at The Fox, he doubts he would have ever eaten there again.

<sup>18</sup> Is it possible that we are more than the sum of our scars?

### Notes:

**A:** For the first month in Washington State, they lived out of Brett's truck and Madison's car in a succession of campsites. They began at Larrabee State Park, with its miles of craggy coast, where they had made love (was it still love by then? [See footnotes 4, 8, and 9]) under the open sky, in full but distant view of the tourists at the roadside overlook. Larrabee was also where he found the seal carcass snagged in the rocks, like a popped inner tube with short hair. He had poked at it with a stick until it yielded up its skull. The crabs had peeled it pretty well, and two days of boiling over the fire in what became known as the "head pot" yielded a fine specimen of an aquatic mammal's skull. He had balanced it on a post in their campsite as a totem of some sort, but came back from work a few days later to find it gone. After that they moved up to Birch Bay State Park, where the tourists quickly became too numerous, sending them inland to Berthusen State Park, and the lonely campground with its banana slugs and stray cats. Strangely, the only other campers there the entire week were three vanloads of Mormons. There were twenty or more grown women, nearly thirty children, and three bearded men. He and his wife had quietly referred to the horde as the polygamists, and from then on, any large van was dubbed a polygamist van.

**B:** Understandably mortified by this, Brett searched the web for help. He learned that this condition is known as adult-onset secondary *enuresis*. At the helpful and aptly named *embarrassingproblems.com*, he learned that stressful events can sometimes cause a resurfacing of enuresis, or bedwetting. He was comforted by this as it allowed him to blame his then wife and ignore the fact that the consumption of large amounts of alcohol is also a contributing factor.

**C:** Khalen's father Melvin worked as a security guard at a baby food plant. Six nights a week he was the only person in the corporate office complex. Most of his shift was spent sitting at the reception desk in the dim lobby, scanning the internet's vast offerings of pornography. His favorite site was

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[see footnotes 1-17, and endnotes A-D]

*The Anal Adventures of Rear-Admiral Willy*. It featured a sweaty old guy (fatter than Melvin, though more tanned, due to his adventures being in the sun as often as not) and his first mate Pokey. The two of them cruised the coast (of Florida, Mel suspected) picking up young girls in obviously staged meetings and inviting them out for an innocent cruise on the *S.S. Willy*. The girls invariably accepted and were soon sunbathing in the nude, which led to blowjobs and intercourse with the Admiral and Pokey and sometimes a few other guys. Even the tired looking older girls (still younger than Melvin by at least a decade and a half) managed to look pained and surprised when Willy slipped his skinny cock past their anal sphincter, but by the time Pokey (who was shorter than the Admiral, but much bigger around) took his turn, they were warmed up and appeared to enjoy themselves. Melvin thought the nautical theme was pretty hokey, but the photo quality was better than the typical motel-room-audition sites, and the girls were relatively young and innocent looking.

Melvin was aware on some level that there was something more than a little perverse about looking at pictures and movie clips of girls the age of his daughter—who was eighteen—having sex with men his own age. This knowledge sat like a lump of something sour at the bottom of his stomach, cramping sometimes. But it was not until the night when he clicked on the thumbnail labeled “Ashley” that he really understood that every one of the Admiral’s girls was, in fact, someone’s daughter. And she was his.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Melvin was ninety-seven percent sure that “Ashley” was actually his daughter, but was prevented from confronting her by the questionable nature of the discovery. Instead he carried out his investigation on three fronts: (1) by trying to find out exactly where she had gone for spring break in her junior and senior year; (2) by trying to find out where exactly Admiral Willy operated; and (3) by spending every night trying to find more pictures of “Ashley,” hoping to assemble enough evidence to confirm or disconfirm her identity.

He had more luck with the first and third than the second. She had gone to Daytona Beach both years, according to his wife. He had no success at all in tracking down the Admiral. Looking at the pictures, he fantasized about flying down to Daytona and searching the docks until he found the *S.S. Willy*. He was not exactly sure what he would do at that

**D:** Her father began by saying that he knew everything. Khalen looked back at him blankly, so he added, “about spring break?”

Her eyes darted to the right, and then returned to him. She was pretty sure that was one of those signs interrogators watched for. She took a deep breath and asked, “So?”

“I know all of it,” he said. “We need to talk about this.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about,” she said. Not entirely true: she thought she could

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point. He found several more pictures, and one blurry video clip of “Ashley.” The family computer also contracted a nasty worm in the process, and he explained to his wife that the internet was like that. She said she’d never gotten a computer infected with a virus. Not that you *know* of, he replied.

He was then ninety-eight percent sure that his daughter had been violated repeatedly aboard the *S.S. Willy* — and he had discovered a litmus test. “Ashley,” it turned out, had Celtic design tattooed low down between her navel and her groin. He noticed this in the seventeenth or eighteenth picture he found. He had, then, only to determine whether Khalen also had such a tattoo or not.

Feeling that asking her openly would reveal his hand, he tried to “accidentally” see her naked. Once he used a tiny flat-head screwdriver to unlock the bathroom door while she showered after her jog. He waited until the water stopped running and then barged in to “get some medicine.” He caught her winding a towel in her long hair. She was turned just enough that he couldn’t see her belly. She shrieked, turning further away and pulling the towel from her hair to wrap beneath her arms. She turned back, red faced, and asked exactly what the hell he thought he was doing. He couldn’t remember what he had intended to say, so he grabbed the first bottle he could find in the medicine cabinet and fled the scene. It was Midol.

After nearly being caught by his wife while trying to sneak into Khalen’s room with a flashlight at three a.m., he decided he would have to confront her. He was at this point, ninety-nine point three percent sure that his daughter was on her way to porn stardom. It was an intensely uncomfortable conversation for both of them [see endnote D].

guess.

Her father looked doubtful for a moment. He swallowed hard, and she noticed the sweat glistening on his forehead. “I saw the website,” he said, “the *pictures*.” His voice cracked.

“What?” She asked. “I have no idea what this is about.” She didn’t.

“How could you *do* that? Why? For *money*? You have . . . I —” He was trembling, and his eyes glinted wet behind his glasses. “Why *that*, with *them*?!”

“What...” He was frightening her. “Just what the *hell* are you talking about?” She had never spoken to him like that before or since.

He stood there trembling and then suddenly seemed to have remembered something. “Khalen,” he began, “Do you have a tattoo? Did you get a tattoo over spring break?” He dragged a hand across his forehead and wiped it on his thigh.

She understood some of it now. She nodded a little, pulling up the leg of her striped pyjamas to reveal a life-size black and yellow butterfly on her right ankle. It had hurt like hell, but she didn’t regret it. It was a tiger swallowtail.

Her father barely glanced at the butterfly. “No,” he whispered, “there.” He pointed at her lower abdomen.

She was confused again, and tired of whatever was going on. “No,” she said. “Look, I got it this one day...a bunch of us were drunk, okay? And we all went down and got them together. But it’s the only one.” And it was. She showed him. He didn’t mention the pierced navel [see footnote 18].