

Darkness had slowly crept in on the world, secretive, surreptitious. Kurt hadn't been paying attention to the time, otherwise he might not have been surprised by the surrounding night as he stepped out of his windowless office into the living room. Night had a habit of sneaking up on him. The living room was situated in the middle of the house. Bedroom, guest room, and gym on one side. Kitchen, dining room, and game room on the other. Windows lined each side of the living room. One side faced the front yard, to the east, the other the back yard, to the west. Sunrise and sunset both flooded the room with that magic, fiery light unique to both times of day, drawing the outside world inside. Conversely, night closed in around the room, shutting it off from the outside world, like prison walls; all that existed were the brilliant lights of the living room. The office, which had been made by combining an extraneous hallway closet and a guest room walk-in closet—a guest room which had been converted into the gym—was deliberately cave-like. Adrienne had suggested Kurt put in a window; Kurt had rejected this idea. He wanted to feel cut off from the world while he was working. It helped him concentrate. The result was that he was often caught off guard by the passage of time. Lunch, supper, the arrival of guests, social events, bedtime, everything surprised him. He glanced at the digital clock hanging over the bar counter which opened into the kitchen. An hour until it was time to leave. He assumed Adrienne was already getting ready. He had wanted to refuse the invitation, make up some excuse not to go, to lie. Adrienne had shut him down. It was her brother's birthday, so she couldn't very well send regrets without a valid reason, though both she and Kurt had the same distaste for adult birthday parties. Birthday parties were for children. There was something grossly narcissistic about a man in his early forties having a party celebrating the dubious honor of becoming a year older. Regardless, Kurt needed to go get ready so that he had plenty of time to pre-game.

On his way from the living room to the bedroom he mentally checked the acceptable outfit options for the party. It would be a business-casual sort of affair so either a nice shirt and a tie, or a nice shirt and a sports coat. A tie was out of the question. Ties were only acceptable attire for formal events, job interviews, or important meetings at work. A sports coat might be too warm, but it was still preferable to tying a slow-choking noose around his neck. Stepping into the bedroom, he was momentarily distracted by the muffled sounds of a hair dryer and the familiar voice of Adrienne's favorite podcaster emitting from the bathroom. Kurt needed to brush his teeth, though he knew better than to interrupt his wife when she was getting ready. Besides, he should probably brush his teeth after the whiskey he was going to drink. He changed course and headed towards his closet. Upon reaching his destination he opened the French doors and stared blankly at the row of coats, shirts, and pants. Can anything requiring formal or even semi-formal wear really be considered a party? Being lazy, at least when it came to clothing, he pulled out what he had worn for the office Christmas party a month before. It was Adrienne approved, and she would have already forgotten what he had worn so that she couldn't accuse him of being an outfit repeater. She remembered everything she had worn at every event in the last six years but forgot what he wore to church the previous Sunday. That was fine with him. He pulled the items out and laid them on the bed. Brown sport coat, light blue shirt, navy pants. That would do just fine.

Fully dressed, he made his way through the living room and into the kitchen. He unlocked the liquor cabinet. He and Adrienne had agreed to install a tiny padlock on the cabinet where their alcohol

was housed, hoping that the additional step to imbibe would lead them to rethink their decision to drink, especially on weeknights. Adrienne claimed that it worked for her. Kurt was convinced the lock simply made the liquor that much more tantalizing; it shifted the alcohol into the world of the forbidden. The forbidden will always have an allure to it, the fruit from the first sin, stolen glances at the pretty young woman in the grocery store, the ill-advised and always disastrous office romance. Kurt wondered what it said about him that those three things were the first examples of “the forbidden” that came to mind. Two out of three involved sex in some capacity. Such a typical man. He hated being so predictable. Musing aside, he unlocked the liquor cabinet and pulled out the whiskey.

Halfway into his first drink Adrienne entered the room. She wore a sleeveless black dress with a slight V-neck. Kurt noticed she was wearing the necklace he had bought her for Christmas. She stepped into the kitchen, took the glass from his hand, and wordlessly turned, revealing that her dress was open in the back. He recognized the bra she was wearing, which immediately conjured up an array of images of her wearing the bra sans dress, which in turn precipitated the hope that they might engage in his favorite pastime when they returned from the party. Kurt studied his wife’s back for a moment before dutifully zipping her dress. Adrienne turned, took a sip of the whiskey, and handed the glass back to him. They kissed lightly, so as not to smear her lipstick. She gave him a knowing look, enjoying the fact that after all these years she still had a hold on him. She wordlessly left the kitchen, crossed the living room, and made her way back to the bedroom. Kurt finished his whiskey and poured himself another, trying to be more conservative on the second round.

He made his way back into the living room and turned on the last few minutes of a show he had started earlier that week. He was still unsure of what he thought about it. This particular episode hadn’t done anything to improve his opinion of it. He spent the remaining ten minutes of the episode wondering why he didn’t try to find something better to do with his time. When the episode was finished, he removed the series from his list. He tried to remember who it was that had recommended the show to him. If he couldn’t remember then he would be doomed to take another suggestion from them.

Adrienne stepped back out into the living room, carrying two sets of heels. Kurt’s gut tightened when he saw the shoes. She was going to ask him for his opinion. She tried on both pairs, taking a few steps in them while mentioning their respective pros and cons. One pair was more comfortable, one matched her dress a little better, and so on. Kurt could hardly tell the difference between them so in his mind the only logical thing to do was to choose the more comfortable pair. Offering opinions on clothing, honest or otherwise, was always a minefield. Not for the stereotypical reasons presented in pseudo-comedies: “does this make me look fat” etcetera. But rather because he had to gauge her mood and analyze her body language to determine if she needed affirmation or if she genuinely wanted an honest appraisal. Then after all this mental calculus he had to appear to be offering an off the cuff, natural, and most importantly, sincere opinion or suggestion. If he failed in his performance, she would notice he wasn’t being genuine and as such press him further, and no matter how much he insisted he was being truthful she would continue to second-guess her decision and his commentary, leaving both of them wondering why she had ever asked him in the first place. The truth was he always thought she looked beautiful, and she never believed him. Oddly enough, the more critical his tone and the more he picked apart slight, and to him unimportant, nuances of the article of clothing, the more she thought that he had actually given it serious thought, even though in reality he was only trying to find a way to end the conversation as quickly as possible. The shorter the conversation the fewer opportunities for

him to say something wrong. This only applied to subjects he knew nothing about, or secretly considered trivial. Otherwise, conversing with Adrienne was his second favorite thing to do with her.

He felt he needed to steer her toward the more comfortable shoes, but he could tell that she favored the other pair because something in her told her that they looked better. If she wore the less comfortable shoes her feet would be hurting all night. His first concern was to save her poor feet from becoming yet another a victim of the faithless mistress of current fashion. Selfishly, he knew that if her feet were hurting when they came home, she would ask him for a foot massage, and he knew that after the agony of socializing with strangers and casual acquaintances that would be the last thing he would want to do. He also knew that he couldn't say no. Marriage for all its many perks is also a bizarre form of indentured servitude. That applies to both parties, so long as it's a good relationship. He wasn't sure what the best way to convince her to wear the more comfortable shoes would be, so he decided to start with honesty, or something close to it.

"So, I personally like those better," meaning the comfortable shoes, which was a half-truth at best. He was indifferent to both pairs.

"And you wore those shoes to Tierra's wedding, and your feet hurt the next day, like all day." "Those shoes" of course referred to the uncomfortable pair, and it was true that she had worn them at their friend Tierra's wedding and her feet hurt for a very long time afterward.

"I think you should wear that pair," indicating the comfortable shoes, "I think they look better, and they won't destroy your feet."

Adrienne pondered his advice. She put on the uncomfortable pair of shoes and paced in front of the mirror that adorned the wall separating the living room from the guest room. She studied her reflection. She then put on the comfortable pair of shoes and again paced in front of the mirror watching herself. She noticed the uncomfortable shoes made her walk unnaturally, because she was trying to find ways to walk without hurting herself. Every step was like learning to walk all over again. At long last she agreed with Kurt.

Adrienne retired to the bedroom to apply the finishing touches to her outfit: jewelry and last-minute touchups to her makeup. Kurt turned on some music and tried to make his whiskey last as long as he possibly could. Finally satisfied, Adrienne stepped out into the living room to find Kurt scrolling mindlessly through his phone. He looked up, put his phone away and approached her. He whispered something naughty to her before kissing her neck just below her ear lobe. He knew it would drive her crazy in the best possible way. They walked arm in arm towards the foyer, separating long enough for him to open the door for her and then lock it behind them before they joined arms again for the short walk down the sidewalk to their car. Ordinarily he would let her open her own car door like an adult, however this particular evening he was feeling slightly like a gentleman, so he opened her door for her. She smiled to herself as she climbed into the car, showing a little more leg than necessary as she pulled her dress up into the safety of the cab. Once the dress was clear he closed her door, gently, but firmly. He walked around to his side of the car, very pleased with how the evening was going. Effective foreplay is a long series of gestures, significant looks, teases, and sly comments throughout an evening. Sex doesn't have to begin in the kitchen. It can begin in the grocery store if you want it to.

Kurt started the car and asked Adrienne to find them some music. He briefly weighed the pros and cons of the different routes to Brandon's house. Depending on the time of day the Interstate could either be much faster, or exponentially slower than driving through the neighborhood. There was much more stop and go traffic through the neighborhood, however if they caught the interstate at rush hour that could add twenty minutes. Kurt checked the time. It was almost six-thirty, rush hour would've passed by now. Driving through the neighborhood, he'd have to deal with a multitude of stop-signs, a serpentine maze of poor city-planning, night-joggers, night-walkers, and slow neighborhood-drivers. By now the interstate should be relatively clear. The choice was simple. He backed out of the driveway and headed to the interstate.

Adrienne had selected a post-punk playlist, which pleased Kurt. They drove through their immediate neighborhood heading towards the point of no return. Up ahead was the intersection of York and Greenvale. He pulled up to the stop sign. If he went straight, he would eventually come to the exit for the interstate. If he turned left, he would follow a long road that passed under the interstate through an old and sprawling neighborhood which would lead him to a thoroughfare that cut through the city to Brandon's "side of town," as they sometimes called it. The interstate still seemed like a better option. He drove straight.

He turned right onto the exit, picking up the necessary speed to merge, watching for incoming traffic. There was none to speak of. He merged seamlessly on to the interstate and stepped on the gas, accelerating to the appropriate speed, which was at least five above. No one who has ever set a speed limit enjoys driving, or getting anywhere on time, which is why they're always too low. As irony would have it, in their city, nobody drove faster than the cops. Kurt smiled to himself, remembering numerous occasions where he had been pushing ninety just to get out of the way of a police officer. He wondered where they were off to. Who needed to be served and protected so badly that they didn't bother to turn on their sirens?

The interstate was four lanes. Kurt eased his way into the lane next to the far right and set the cruise control. He glanced at Adrienne. She was staring out at the road, but keenly aware of his glances. In between his walking from her door to his, she had taken the opportunity to position her skirt in such a way so that her leg was exposed. If she had worn the skirt as it was intended no such amount of leg would have been on display, but like most women's clothing it was multi-purpose. It was an invitation. Kurt reached out his hand and placed it on her warm, smooth thigh. The proffered leg and the touch were a promise they made one to the other. Get through this and we'll make it worth our while. Kurt smiled wryly to himself. Anticipation would paradoxically make the evening better, knowing he had something to look forward to, and worse, knowing that he had to wait for it in the company of people he rarely enjoyed, though mostly tolerated.

There was a light mist in the air. Kurt hadn't noticed it at their house, but he recalled seeing that the forecast had called for rain. It was slowly making its way through the city as a swirl of light raindrops that didn't seem to fall but rather materialize ex nihilo. It seemed as though the drops simply hung suspended in mid-air, and if it wasn't for the fact that the car was moving forward crashing through them, they would've hung there indefinitely. Kurt turned his wipers on, forcing all the beaded droplets on the windshield together, breaking their individual surface tension, forming one long ribbon of water to be flung aside by the rubber wipers.

Kurt squinted through the windshield, internally bemoaning his poor night-vision. Mist layered upon darkness creating an environment akin to driving through murky water. It seemed as though the mist scattered the light from the headlights so that only the road immediately ahead was visible. Everything beyond the range of the lights were amorphous gray shapes with edges blurred by water.

He wasn't sure which of them saw him first. He just knew by their shared murmur of shock and horror that they had both seen him. A tall, lanky black man walking down the center of the far-left lane. Walking in their direction. Into incoming traffic. Only one lane separated them. They rushed past him. Kurt looked in his rear-view mirror. The man disappeared into the darkness stretching behind them. He glanced at Adrienne who was dialing a three-digit number on her phone. It rang for a long time before anyone picked up.

"Hi, yes, we were at mile marker 97 or so on Interstate 55. There's a guy walking down the middle of the far-left lane towards traffic. Yes, OK, ok good. Thanks."

Adrienne hung up her phone and turned to Kurt, "It sounds like they've gotten a lot of calls about him already. It took forever for them to pick up. What the hell is he doing?"

"It looks like he was stumbling a bit. He must've been high or something."

Kurt looked down at the odometer. He was going seventy. What if he had been driving in the left lane? What would a three-thousand-pound car traveling at seventy miles an hour do to a human body? He shuddered. They had thankfully been spared that horror. He felt guilty for feeling relief that he hadn't been the one to pulverize the man before thinking of his wellbeing. The man was still out there. For how much longer?

"Holy shit." Kurt wasn't sure what else to say.

Adrienne murmured agreement, "He must be out of his mind."

What if he wasn't? What if this was the stranger's way of getting a cheap thrill? What if this was his way out? Kurt supposed that in either case he still wasn't in a healthy frame of mind. No matter what the scenario he was bringing someone else into his world. Into his madness, whatever kind of madness it was. Someone would eventually hit him, become his unwitting, unintentional executioner. Or else someone would swerve dangerously at the last minute, perhaps into another car. Maybe he wouldn't be killed. Maybe he would cause someone else to be.

"Should we turn around?"

Adrienne turned to Kurt, "And do what?"

"I don't know."

Adrienne thought for a moment, "I can't imagine a scenario where our presence would help anything. We'd basically have to block that lane with our car, putting us in danger, and he'd probably just start walking in one of the other lanes. There's not a shoulder on that side we can park on and try to... I don't know, coax him to the side of the road... What could we really do?"

"I don't know. You're right. We wouldn't really help matters. You called the police and they're on their way."

They sat in silence.

“What’s going on in his mind? I mean, what kind of state do you have to be in to... I’m not sure which is worse. Him being high off his ass or suicidal. What if he’s too out of it to really know what he’s doing? What if he has no idea the danger he’s in? Is that worse than him knowing what he’s doing and wanting it?”

Adrienne shook her head, “I don’t know. It’s all pretty awful.”

Kurt reflected for a moment, “Though I think it speaks poorly of his character if he knows what he’s doing, and this is how he chose to do it. He shouldn’t force anyone else to be a part of it.”

Kurt’s statement was followed by another prolonged silence.

“Was that a terrible thing to say?”

Adrienne, musing, “I don’t know, maybe. If it is then we’re both terrible people. I thought the same thing.”

“It’d be kind of a revenge thing then, wouldn’t it?”

“How so?”

“Make the world acknowledge your pain by making someone else kill you in a violent... horrible way.”

This was followed by another silence, though shorter than the last one.

Adrienne turned to Kurt, “Should we still go to the party?”

“Yes,” Kurt tried to sound certain though he was anything but, “I think we should.”

“Yeah... It’s not going to do him any good for us to go home and worry.”

Kurt nodded. It wouldn’t do any of them any good. He looked up and checked the exit number, aware that he hadn’t been paying attention to the exits since they had passed the man on the road. There was coming up soon. After checking his mirrors and blind-spot, and then re-checking them all again—the man had made him exponentially more cautious in his driving—he merged into the right lane.

They weren’t the first ones to the party, but they were still too early. There were not enough people there for Kurt to blend in with the crowd, and ultimately disappear, which was all he wanted to do. After greeting the hosts, Brandon and his wife Heather, Kurt scanned the room for the bar. He quickly found it. He asked Adrienne if she wanted something to drink to which she replied “anything.” On his way to the bar, Chad, a friend of Brandon’s latched, on to him. Chad was desperately searching for a new job and was hoping that Kurt could put in a good word for him regarding a position that had recently opened up at his firm. Kurt didn’t know Chad and as such wasn’t sure if he felt comfortable recommending him for a position at his day-job, as he referred to it. He had to hold on to the day-job until his side-projects became a paying gig. He didn’t want to taint his reputation by recommending a bad, or rather potentially bad employee. Kurt listened as well as he could, distracted by myriad other concerns, but most of all how he could extricate himself from Chad. Chad talked to him the entire time

he was making the drinks, which given the options turned out to be Gin and Tonics. Chad, still talking, followed Kurt back to Adrienne. On the plus side, Kurt wouldn't have to verbally commit to recommending Chad for a job if he never got a chance to speak.

Adrienne was speaking in hushed tones to Heather when Kurt returned. It didn't take him long to realize they were talking about the man on the interstate.

"Ughh, I can't imagine. That's so scary."

Heather was sympathetic to Adrienne and her frazzled nerves. In a moment of passing self-righteousness, Kurt thought it would be more appropriate for Heather to be concerned about the welfare of the man on the road, which of course she was. However, in that precise moment she was being supportive of her sister-in-law.

Chad cut in, "Wait, what happened?"

Kurt tried to hide his chagrin as Adrienne was obliged to bring Chad up to speed.

"Damn, that guy must have been blitzed, huh?"

Something in Kurt wanted to contradict Chad, but that was immature, nonetheless he did protest mildly:

"He was stumbling a little bit, but I don't think he was drunk necessarily. I mean he was probably on something so, yeah."

"Either way, I will not have whatever he's having."

Chad laughed weakly at his own joke. The others smiled politely, searching for something else to talk about. They were spared an awkward pause by the arrival of Bret, widely considered to be the life of any and every party he attended. This was a welcome development. Chad drifted towards Bret like a moth to a flame, or rather, to put it uncharitably, like a weak, forgettable personality to a strong, memorable personality. Chad was the type who thought that being in close proximity with someone who was interesting made him interesting as well. He didn't realize that it just meant he got swallowed up in the largesse of the other person, relegated to the audience. He was also the kind to interject, to try to add on to and partake in the stories the more interesting person was telling. Fortunately for him, he wasn't particularly self-aware, so he didn't feel the general awkwardness when he tried to jump in, unwanted and uninvited, to whatever yarn was being told.

Chad, and the partygoers in general, slowly converged on Bret. Kurt took the opportunity to walk out onto the patio. He stepped outside, quietly closing the sliding door behind him, trying not to disturb anyone else and more importantly trying not to draw attention to himself. Someone might take it upon themselves to go keep him company, not realizing that being alone on the back porch by the pool was exactly where he wanted to be.

The mist had picked up again. Slowly but surely, it coated everything and everyone that was outside. A slow, creeping dampness. Kurt sipped his drink, watching the other guests laugh uproariously in response to one of Bret's punchlines. More and more people were showing up. As the living room began to fill the crowd would start to expand, moving into the dining room, the game room, the kitchen. Despite the cold, wet air, they might even migrate outside. Kurt receded to the back of the yard to the

fire-pit. Kurt had helped Brandon install it. Kurt was fairly certain that he was the only one who had used it. He lit the fire pit and sat down next to it, underneath a large, white canopy, which managed to shield him from at least some of the mist.

As Kurt stared down at the fire, his mind inevitable turned back to the man on the road. The man could very well be dead already. That was the most likely outcome. Alternatively, what if the man had been hit and was now on life-support in the hospital? What if he was brain-dead, a human vegetable? What if his family was debating whether or not to pull the plug? What if he didn't have any family? What if he remained unclaimed in the hospital? How long would it take before the staff decided it was time to let him quietly die? Most of the scenarios Kurt imagined were as grim as the man dying on the road. It was possible the man had come to his senses in time and walked off the road to the relative safety of the shoulder. Maybe the police had arrived and ushered him away unscathed. Kurt didn't dwell on the potential positive outcomes as much as the negative. He had always had a morbid bent of mind. He much preferred doom and gloom to positivity. He didn't like that about himself. Especially when it came to what was for the stranger a matter of life and death. A part of him wanted the worst to happen, not because he bore the man any ill will, not because he thought that it would "serve him right," but because he was fascinated by tragedy. He shook his head, disgusted with himself.

He hadn't seen or heard Heather approach. In retrospect he didn't know how she had snuck up on him. Most likely he was just too absorbed by the fire. At any rate, when she spoke, alerting him to her presence he was startled. She was asking if he was okay, concerned.

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"OK, it's just... That would be such a weird thing. To see that guy out there on the road. I wasn't even there and it makes me feel weird."

Presumably she thought Kurt was avoiding the crowd because he was bothered by what he saw on the road. In truth Kurt was just avoiding the crowd because crowds were something worth avoiding, though the man on the road certainly didn't make the crowd any more tolerable.

He shrugged, "I agree, it is weird. And I feel weird. What about it makes you feel that way?"

"Well... It's kind of like seeing an accident. You're completely powerless, but you feel like you want to help, or that you should do something, but what can you really do?"

"I'd just be in the way if I tried to help, at an accident or anything like that."

"You'd be more help than you think, but yeah, that's how I feel too."

There was a brief pause.

Kurt, mused darkly, "I feel a strange sense of doom about the whole thing. Like he was walking directly into some inevitable fate. In a way it kind of makes me feel better to think that he knew what he was doing. That he wasn't high or drunk or whatever. That he was basically just saying, 'screw it.'"

"Except that he's bringing some other person into it. Someone else is going to be an unwilling participant in his death."

"I thought that exact thing earlier."



“Yeah... Well, if you want to talk, I’m here.”

Kurt nodded. He didn’t want to talk, nor did he need to, but he knew Heather meant well so he thanked her. She awkwardly took her leave and Kurt turned back to the firepit.

He looked up at the party. It was expanding in the house. No one else was venturing outside. Apparently, the cold, misty air was enough of a deterrent to keep the partygoers inside an increasingly cramped house. He noticed people casting surreptitious glances in his direction with increasing frequency. This was the signal that he couldn’t stay outside for much longer. He would have to venture back inside and mingle. He pulled out his phone and began scrolling, hoping that it would look like he was doing something important, but he knew that particular façade wouldn’t hold for long. He had to assimilate before he became the subject of gossip. Sighing, he put away his phone, shut off the fire-pit, and headed back inside. He needed a re-fill anyway.

The noise inside was deafening. He carefully traversed the crowd, making his way towards the bar, stopping here and there to greet an acquaintance and make small talk. Adrienne intercepted him on the way, asked if he was going to get another drink and when he said yes, asked for another Gin and Tonic. Once at the bar Kurt made Adrienne her drink and chose whiskey on the rocks for his second round.

He felt Jim draw near before he heard him speak, “Hey Kurt.”

“Hey Jim, how’s it going?”

“Oh, pretty good, whatcha drinking?”

“Got a Gin and Tonic for the wife, and a whiskey on ice for me.”

“Good choice, good choice”

Jim seemed strangely nervous.

“You want a whiskey, Jim?”

Kurt asked out of politeness, before he noticed that Jim was holding a beer.

“Nah nah I’m good. I heard about what happened man, I’m sorry that’s messed up.”

Kurt was confused for a moment, then it clicked.

“Oh, the guy on the road?”

“Yeah, man, it’s crazy.”

“Yeah... It’s pretty messed up.”

Kurt didn’t know what else to do but agree. Jim stood silently for a moment, staring off into space, thinking about something, with an oddly intense expression on his face.

“I would’ve turned around.”

He said it aloud, as though by accident, as though a thought somehow slipped out into the world of its own volition. Kurt knew what Jim meant. Jim would’ve been a hero. Jim would’ve saved the man.

Unlike Kurt. Kurt studied Jim warily. Jim did not make eye contact. He just stared blankly off into space, apparently imagining the scenarios where he selflessly talked the man off the road and on to the safety of the shoulder, with a rousing movie score for extra effect. Kurt shrugged, offended, and annoyed, and walked away.

Kurt took his whiskey for a walk around the room. Adrienne's Gin and Tonic came along for the ride. He had lost her in the crowd, so her orphaned drink had no choice but to accompany him through the room as he did his best to appear to enjoy the party without engaging with anyone. Carrying two drinks helped, he looked like a man on a mission. Someone made a passing joke about "double-fisting." He laughed politely in response. Kurt ruefully reflected that it wouldn't bother him if he never found Adrienne, until after the party of course. He was quite content to wander through the crowd trying to find her, to deliver her drink, for the rest of the evening. No such luck. She emerged from a cluster of people to his right, took the drink from his hand, and immediately replaced it with her own hand, which she then used to lead him into the aforementioned cluster, into a conversation in media res, which he did not understand and which he was not interested in.

Again, images of the man on the road flashed through his mind. He was beginning to distrust them. He had barely seen the man, but now he could picture his every feature, the style of his goatee, the sheen of his shaved head, the orange hoodie, the ring on his pinky. There was no way that he could have picked up on all these details passing the man at 70 miles per hour in the misty dark. His mind was filling in the blanks, creating a complete figure, replete with details, whereas in reality he only had time to pick out three: tall, black, and lanky. This retrospective figure had completely replaced the original. He could no longer conjure up the actual man. This new, imagined stranger had supplanted the real person in his memory.

Someone in the cluster asked him a question tangentially related to the conversation he wasn't paying attention to. He turned to this person, a pretty young woman whose name he couldn't remember and politely as he could said, "I'm sorry?"

"What did you think of Carl's article?"

Kurt scanned the small crowd he had been unwillingly drawn into and found that Carl was among them. Carl looked at him, hopeful anticipation beaming from his eyes. Kurt blushed slightly and cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to say I haven't read it."

Carl's face fell. Adrienne immediately began offering up excuses on Kurt's behalf. He had been very busy lately, with both work and personal projects, which was true. However, the real reason Kurt had not read Carl's latest piece of political commentary was because he didn't want to. Kurt had never found Carl's analysis to be particularly salient, or even interesting. As bad luck would have it Carl was always very interested in Kurt's opinion on current events, and in particular Kurt's opinions on his articles. Despite Kurt having no interest in anything Carl had ever written and very little interest in Carl's life in general, for some reason he didn't want to disappoint Carl, or to hurt his feelings in any way. Kurt murmured that he "hoped to get to it soon," which pleased Carl. The conversation quickly moved on to something else.

Kurt squeezed his wife's hand, a signal that he was leaving the cluster, and made his way towards a bookcase to peruse the titles. He pulled a leatherbound edition of *Ivanhoe* off the shelf and flipped through it, carefully depositing his drink on a coaster placed on the shelf for his convenience. As a teenager, Kurt had briefly been interested in the works of Sir Walter Scott. This interest, brief as it was, had led to a fairly comprehensive collection of the author's works, a collection which lamentably, outside of *Ivanhoe* and *The Talisman*, had remained unread.

He was searching for a passage regarding a joust, which occurred towards the end of the book, when once again the man on the road intruded upon his thoughts, with new imagined features. The orange hoodie had a college name written across it, his sneakers were an overly expensive brand that Kurt recognized but couldn't name, his jeans were a white-wash. The man was soon to be, if he wasn't already, a statistic, a traffic fatality. Perhaps someday an intrepid reporter would get to the bottom of the man's motivation to tempt fate in so gruesome a manner. Perhaps Kurt would learn that the man had lost a loved one and had chosen to despair and die. Perhaps the man had been beaten down by an unkind world and driven to seek a more passive way out. Perhaps the man was just, how did Chad put it? Blitzed. It occurred to Kurt that the only way he would ever find out the man's motivations was if the worst were to happen. If the worst happened it would warrant a news story of some kind, though the story might not go into the desired level of detail. Most likely Kurt would never know why the man had chosen to wander driftless down the road into a plasticine horde of killer cars. An image of the man being struck by a car barreling down the fast lane, turning the highway into a charnel house popped into his mind. It was unwelcome.

"Hey man."

Kurt snapped the book shut. He turned. Brandon was standing next to him, concerned.

"Adrienne told me about that guy on the road. That's so weird."

"Yeah, it is."

So was everyone's interest in him. Then again, maybe not. They were all interested in the man for the same morbid reasons he was. Kurt shook these thoughts from his head.

"At any rate, happy birthday. Did you get everything you wished for?"

Brandon smiled broadly, "Not even close."

Brandon was very handsome. Strong jaw, thick brown hair, deep hazel eyes, a natural athletic physique which he could maintain with very little effort. He was also very charming. Not for the first time Kurt realized he envied his brother-in-law.

"He must've just given up, I guess. I mean, why else would he be walking into traffic like that?"

Kurt shook his head, "I have no idea. Anything we think of is just going to be conjecture. And I admit I have thought of a number of different scenarios but, it's starting to feel... wrong."

"Why wrong?"

"It just doesn't seem like we should be speculating about his motivation when he was in very serious danger. He could be dead now for all I know."

“I know it’s so weird to think about, isn’t it? But I mean that’s kind of life though, right? It can end so fast. Really makes you think...”

“Yeah, I guess it does.”

Kurt desperately wanted the conversation to be over. While nothing was being said, Brandon was staring into space, musing, which meant the conversation could be picked up again at any moment. Kurt wondered when it would be safe for him to try to steer it in another direction.

“Did you get to use the firepit at all when it was colder?”

Brandon’s eyes flickered, “Yeah, we used it once or twice. Thanks again for helping me set it up.”

“You’re welcome. Maybe Adrienne and I can come by some night and we can make s’mores or something.”

“Absolutely. Be fun. Well, if you’ll excuse me, I need to mingle.”

“Of course.”

Brandon meandered through the room, bouncing from one group to the next like a slow-moving pinball making small talk as he went. Eventually his wanderings led him to the drink table, which Kurt had briefly considered migrating to after their awkward conversation. He would wait until Brandon moved on, so as to avoid a continuation of their previous discussion. Chad approached Brandon at the table, and the two of them lingered, slowly making their drinks, and laughing to each other about something. There was no telling when the drink table would be safe to approach. In the meantime, Kurt felt it unwise to continue standing alone by the bookcase. Anyone could approach him at any time.

An explosion of laughter erupted from the corner of the room. Bret was telling a story to a large, very appreciative group in the corner. Ordinarily, Kurt avoided Bret, but he didn’t want anyone to come talk to him, and at that precise moment in time it seemed that the safest thing for him to do was to disappear into Bret’s audience. Slowly, he made his way to the crowd and unobtrusively as possible, inserted himself into its periphery. Bret spotted him almost immediately.

“Dude! Heather told me about that guy on the road!”

Everyone in the crowd turned to him.

“There was a guy in the road?”

Kurt wasn’t sure who had spoken. He cleared his throat, clutching his empty glass.

“Yes... There was a gentleman walking down the middle of the fast lane on the highway on our way over here. Adrienne called 911. They were sending someone out to help him.”

There was collective horrified murmuring from the crowd.

Someone asked: “Just walking down the middle of the lane? At night?”

“Yes. Just walking down the road. Towards incoming traffic.”

“Was he high?”

"I don't know. It all happened very quickly."

Bret's eyes were glowing with interest, and several whiskeys.

"How did it feel when you saw him?"

"It was eerie. It felt, and still feels very strange. I'm not entirely sure how I should feel about it to be perfectly honest."

Bret's only response was a look of puzzled dissatisfaction, which at first confused Kurt; though after a moment's reflection he thought he understood its meaning. Master raconteur that he was, Bret would no doubt have milked the tale for all it was worth, much to the delighted horror of the people crowding around him. Kurt had missed a golden story telling opportunity, and wasted opportunities always made Bret sad.

The crowd also seemed disappointed in Kurt's honest, no-fluff response to Bret's question. They murmured to each other then slowly turned back to Bret, who once again, and more than willingly, took up the responsibility of entertaining them.

Kurt felt strangely insulted by the summary dismissal of his unwanted audience. Which he realized was absurd for multiple reasons. He was not, nor should he be, the focal point of the story about the man on the road. Furthermore, he had wanted the conversation to end as quickly as possible. As such he should have been pleased to be so quickly ignored. Nonetheless, their indifference still stung a little. Kurt lingered for as long as he felt was necessary, and then departed for the drink table, which was now safe to approach.

Kurt was mostly ignored for the rest of the evening, which was fine with him. He once again found himself alone by the firepit. The mist had lifted. The air had gotten colder. Kurt, sensing the evening was winding down, at least for him and Adrienne, had switched to club soda. His buzz was slowly fading away into unwelcome sobriety. He looked up at the crowd inside, wondering why he continued to put himself through all this nonsense.

Adrienne appeared at the door; an angel come to deliver him from the evening's festivities. They searched for and found their hosts, thanking them for a lovely evening, and once again wishing Brandon a happy birthday.

Kurt opened Adrienne's car door for the second time that evening. This was a new record post-marriage. It was not quite so rare while dating. Regrettably, there was no flash of extra leg to reward him for his efforts this time. It was much colder now, and Adrienne despised the cold. Kurt internally lamented the fact that he had not started the heat before they got in the car, while Adrienne verbally lamented the fact that she had not reminded him. She pulled her coat tighter around her as Kurt pulled out into the road.

Kurt debated internally as to what route he should take. The interstate would be faster, and he was anxious to return to the level of inebriation he had lost through a half hour of drinking carbonated water. When Adrienne realized the route Kurt had opted to take, she wondered aloud if they should go through the neighborhood. Kurt glanced at her. She stared pensively ahead, worried what carnage they might encounter on the way back. Kurt considered this for a moment, then shook his head.

“Interstate will be faster.”

Adrienne did not protest. They drove in silence past several intersections before she absent-mindedly re-started her post-punk playlist. They pulled to a stop at the last intersection before their exit. Up ahead, Kurt could see passing headlights in the dark. He could see the steep ramp that led up to the interstate. From his vantage point it looked as though that was all it was, a ramp, and that when they reached the end of it they would go careening off the edge into the night. He thought about the man and briefly wondered if he had made a mistake in choosing this route. He told himself it was too late to turn around. The light turned green. He accelerated up the ramp, which did not end in oblivion, but instead merged with the interstate at the very last second.

The road was even more empty than it had been earlier that evening. Nonetheless, Kurt found himself driving slower than he normally did. He kept waiting for the man to materialize in the glare of his headlights. It was inevitable. The man would appear in the road with no time for Kurt to properly react, making a murderer out of him. Kurt could hear the squealing brakes. He could hear the sound of the collision, of machine mercilessly plowing into flesh. He could feel the man’s body bounce across the hood of his car. He could see the corpse lying mangled on the side of the road in his rear-view mirror.

In a few miles they would round a bend and be at mile marker ninety-seven, where they had seen the man mere hours before, albeit on the other side of the interstate. Kurt could feel Adrienne tense. He imagined the flashing lights of the ambulances. He imagined police officers funneling traffic into a single lane, so that everyone could drive past and watch as the paramedics lifted the lonely body onto a stretcher.

There were no flashing lights around the bend. There was no traffic jam. The road was completely clear, even pristine. Kurt and Adrienne were both relieved. Until they remembered the man could have been hit further down the road.

The rest of the drive was uneventful. Kurt exited, and slowly navigated his way through the neighborhood. Home was near. Adrienne, now warm, reached out and took Kurt’s hand.

“It’s so crazy.”

She turned to him, “What is?”

“How clear the road was. Just a few hours ago someone was on the highway, tempting God, or fate, or whatever you want to call it. Something important was happening, for him at least. Life and death hung in the balance. A few hours later, just another road. The world forgets us so quickly.”

Adrienne didn’t quite understand why Kurt thought this was so profound. But she was very tired. Parties always exhausted her. Her brother and sister-in-law exhausted her. All she wanted to do now was curl up on the couch with a nightcap. She remembered their various subtle and not-so subtle overtures to each other before leaving for the party and wondered if Kurt was still in the mood. She hated to disappoint him, but she knew she would never be able to muster the energy.

Kurt pulled into their driveway. Adrienne opened her door and followed him up the steps to their front porch. Kurt opened the door for her. She slipped past him into the dark of the living room, fumbling for the light switch on the wall. She found it just as Kurt closed and locked the door. Wordlessly they made their way to the bedroom and began the process of preparing for bed. If Kurt was in the

mood he gave no indication, perhaps because he knew she was no longer interested, or perhaps because he was tired himself. They shared a nightcap in bed, watching online videos. They brushed their respective teeth, the concluding action of the day. Now they could go to sleep.

Morning came, as it always does. It was a Saturday. Kurt woke early and made them breakfast. Adrienne stumbled half-drunk with sleep into the kitchen. She was wearing her navy-blue nightgown, which was shorter than her others. She walked to the cabinet, stood on her tip-toes, and reached up to the top-shelf for her favorite mug. This action of reaching pulled her nightgown up, revealing just enough skin to alert Kurt to the absence of panties. He asked her if she was interested in taking a shower after breakfast. She smiled sleepily, kissed him, and said “maybe.” Nine times out of ten maybe meant yes. Kurt couldn’t be sure how accurate his calculations were, but he still liked his odds.

Kurt was pleased with the Eggs Benedict. The poached eggs had turned out just right. He was a proficient cook, but he was particularly adept at breakfast. Adrienne quietly murmured in appreciation as she ate.

Halfway through the meal Kurt abruptly asked:

“Do you think he survived?”

Adrienne faltered, “If he didn’t it’s probably on the news.”

“... Should I check?”

Neither of them spoke for a long time.