

Driving Home

He was pushing it and he knew it. The needle on the speedometer passed 70 and was moving closer to 80. He turned the wipers off and the rain smacked against the windshield in large droplets. They crawled up the treated windshield and over the car. He could see better without the wipers. *This isn't so bad*, he thought. He smiled and turned up the music, a melodramatic country rock song, which fit his mood.

The drive from Key West to their home on the beach south of Miami usually took just under four hours. Tom *was* pushing it, though. Hurricane Sylvia, which was supposed to be moving it's way through the lower Caribbean, had turned. It was headed for the Keys. When Tom heard the news, he moved quickly. He packed up his bag and Katie's and checked out.

"Are you sure you wouldn't like to stay another night," the front desk attendant had asked him. He had assured her that they would make it out of the Keys before the storm came. But he was wrong about the storm. The droplets beating against his windshield were from the outer bands of the storm.

"It's too loud daddy." He looked into the rearview mirror at Katie. She had put her fingers in each of her ears and was staring back at him with wide, pleading eyes. He turned down the music. "Thank you, daddy," she said to him.

"You're welcome honey." He looked back at her. She sat in a booster seat on the passenger side of the car. She was holding a Muppet Baby Fozzie Bear. It had been Tom's when he was a boy. The oatmeal color of the bear was faded and the pink tongue and red mouth were now almost the same color. But it still had the green scarf with red tufts at the end and the red hat. Tucked under the seat belt was a book, the other thing she kept with her

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always. It was *Love You Forever*, a book her mother Katherine had given her two years earlier. Two weeks before the accident.

There were no other cars on US 1. *I'm the only dummy trying this.* He reached his hand back and grabbed Katie's hand. "How's Fozzie doing?" he asked her.

She looked at him. "He's okay. I think he's tired."

"Well just keep on holding him close and I'm sure he'll fall right asleep."

They were crossing the Seven Mile Bridge. To the north was the Old Seven Mile Bridge, which was just visible through the rain. He had asked his wife, Katie's mother, to marry him on the old bridge, which was now just a walking bridge. It had been 10 years ago, three years before Katie was born.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! An emergency alert signal broke through the country song. *Why the fuck am I listening to music right now?* The Governor had declared a state of emergency and was asking the federal government for assistance. BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! The emergency alert ended but the song did not continue. A DJ came on to talk about the storm. The worst storm to hit the Keys since Hurricane Donna in 1960, the DJ was saying. Sustained winds of 120 mph with gusts that could reach 150 mph. People were advised to get off the roads immediately.

Katie was listening to the radio. She started, "Daddy."

"It's okay honey," Tom said to Katie. "We're going to be okay. We are going to be home soon. You want to go home, right?"

"Yes, daddy."

"Well, we are going to be home soon, I promise."

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"Okay daddy." She grabbed at the book.

Katherine had died two years ago. They had a babysitter watching Katie and they went out to a new restaurant in Miami. Katherine liked that – dressing up and going to new places – reminding him that she could still fit into the tight dresses that drove him crazy when they were dating. She'd teased him the whole day and when they drove she would hike up the dress a little so that he could see her thighs. She was doing that after they left the restaurant, after probably too many drinks. And he was grabbing at her thigh and he was realizing that she wasn't wearing any underwear when their car was t-boned by a late model pickup. It was one of those pickups driven by a wannabe good ol' boy, jacked up high on lifted suspension with giant chrome rims and big, thick tires. The good ol' boy had run a red light and they hadn't seen his truck. Their wagon had flipped and the booster seat in the back had come loose and hit Katherine in the back of the head, knocking her out.

He hadn't lost consciousness, but the car was upside down. She was slumped up on the roof, her legs draped on the back of the car seat and when he reached out to her she didn't respond. She looked like a doll in a box, strapped in and motionless. But she was breathing - short, ragged breaths. He unstrapped himself and fell to the roof. He crawled over to her. "Kathy," he yelled, but his voice was barely a whisper. He opened his door. He undid her seatbelt and carefully pulled her out onto the pavement through his door, taking off his sport coat and laying it under her head.

She was still in the hospital a few weeks later. She had never woken up. The doctors told him she had suffered significant blood on the brain the doctors had told him. Too much pressure. Her head was wrapped, covering up the wound from where they had drilled into

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her skull. The good ol' boy's truck didn't even really do it. That just teed her up to be hit just right by the booster seat which had come undone. If Katie had been in the car, she would probably be dead. And Katherine would probably be alive. He didn't know which way he wanted it and he tried not to ever think about it like that.

During that time in the hospital Katherine's parents were there. They prayed and he would watch them, watch their lips move and he tried to listen to the words that they were saying. He had given up God years before, but he was relieved that they were there. Katie was allowed to visit every couple of days and he would sit with her and read *Love You Forever* while the respirator machine toiled in the background. It was the most vicious white noise: a constant reminder that everything was not okay. After each time he read he would tell her that mommy was going to love her forever, no matter what.

After the doctors had told him the news about his wife, the lawyers came. Katherine and he had discussed this before, but in fantasy terms disconnected from any impending reality. The discussion was about what one would do if the other would get terminally ill, from an incurable cancer or something like that. They had agreed and wrote living wills. Their wishes were the same: withdraw life support.

And so that's what was done. That day he brought Katie in and they sat on the bed next to Katherine and read the story one last time. He told Katie to kiss her and to give her a hug and he did the same.

Katherine was cremated the next day. He had kept the ashes for two years, locked in a cabinet. He couldn't bring himself to spread them like she had asked him when they had had that fantasy discussion about dying because he refused to let that fantasy become

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reality. He was wracked with guilt over pulling the plug so quickly. *Should we have given her more time?* And he knew that once he spread the ashes that was it. That was the goodbye and the last piece of Katherine he had would be his lovely little girl.

That's why they had driven to the Keys in the first place. He was finally ready to spread her ashes according to her wishes, off of the Old Seven Mile Bridge, right near where she had said yes when he had asked her to marry him. He explained what they were doing to Katie – by that point she had long accepted that her mother was gone and he thought that she should be a part of it. So they went out on the old bridge, all the way to where you can't walk any farther. He had asked Katherine to marry him there.. He told Katie the story of his proposal and told her how much she reminded him of Katherine. And he took the urn out and opened it. The ashes caught the wind and flew north and they lost sight of them in the horizon between the blue sky and the green water of the Gulf.

So he had said goodbye, in a way. They continued towards Key West afterwards. But he wanted to get the fuck out of the Keys and Sylvia was a good enough excuse to cut their trip short. He had to get home.

They were in Marathon. He saw signs for various hotels and motels but he ignored those. *If anything, it's raining less.* They had also stopped at the Turtle Hospital on their way to Key West, mile marker 48.5. After they toured the hospital, a veterinarian named Sally drove them to a beach nearby with a loggerhead named Tony that had some viral tumors removed. They all worked together to get Tony out of the truck bed and onto the beach. Tom and Katie watched as Tony waddled his way into the green Gulf and out of sight.

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They left Marathon and entered a stretch of smaller islands in the archipelago. The miles were moving swiftly by - almost a mile a minute. And Tom was keenly aware of it. Florida City was near mile marker 127. Once there, they would get on the turnpike and be home 20 minutes later. They were passing mile marker 64 when he noticed the water on the road was building up. His SUV handled it easily enough, but for the first time in their trip he felt regret. His high beams pierced through the darkening gray and when he checked his sideview and rearview mirrors he saw the same thing he had seen for the past 45 minutes: empty road.

He was driving slower and it took effort to push the Jeep like he had before. The water in the roadway made a persistent swishing noise as they struggled through it. The sign on the right side of the road said, "Little Clam Key - the littlest patch of grass in the Keys". The car drove slightly up the bridge into Little Clam and was on the island. There were no permanent buildings on the island and the Gulf and Atlantic were both visible from US 1. Tom could barely make them out in the graying skies. The swishing of the water had stopped but Tom kept the Jeep at a slower pace.

The island was only a few hundreds yards long, but it was higher above sea level than the western bridge. As Tom approached the eastern bridge, the swishing of the water on the ground started up again. And then the ground was gone. He hit the brakes but nothing happened. He put the car in reverse; and, again, no effect. They were floating in the water. *What the fuck do I do?* He turned around and looked back at Katie. She was quiet, with an anxious look on her face. Her left hand was white with a tight grip on her book, her right hand was the same with Fozzie. But Tom was a man of action. He put the car in neutral. "Honey,"

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he said as he leaned back through the opening in the two front seats, unstrapping her. He pulled her forward and put her next to him in the driver's seat. "I need you to hold the wheel steady." He opened his door and jumped into a couple of feet of water, holding onto the door.

"Daddy," she cried at him.

"Baby girl," he told her, holding the door with one hand and putting the other against her left cheek as gently as he could. "I'm going to push the car back onto the road." *Can I even fucking do that?* "I need you to just hold the wheel steady for me. Just like this." He took her hand and put it on the wheel. "Right in the middle." She was grabbing the steering wheel, but she couldn't see over it. "Can you do that for me?"

She sniffled. "Yes, daddy." She was holding the wheel with same tight white grip that she had been using on her book and bear. "I think so."

"Good girl," he said to her. "I love you."

"I love you daddy."

"I will be right back," he said in the calmest voice he could muster.

"Yes, right back."

He put the driver window all the way down and latched the door but didn't close it fully. The rain was coming into the window and Katie was squirming in her seat. "Don't worry about the water, baby. I just want you to be able to hear me."

"Okay," she said as she stopped moving around.

The water was moving, but he could still maneuver in it. The bottoms of his shorts were wet. He moved to the front of the Jeep, gripping the hood and the wheel well as he went around the side of the vehicle. "Honey?" he yelled.

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"Yes, daddy," he heard her yell back. He couldn't see her face, but he saw her small hands on the wheel.

"I'm going to push the car now. And then I will be right back. Keep the wheel steady."

"Okay!"

His hands were on the front grill. He steadied his feet on the road and was ready to push. He pushed. He felt the car move backward and took a couple of steps, pushing it back. *This is working!* He felt relief. He was walking the car back, slowly. His legs were heavy in the water and he was trying to be careful, trying to resist the urge to push as hard as he could. And then it got significantly harder. *The road!* He was too excited. He pushed hard and put his shoulder into the front of the Jeep, which continued its slow reverse.

And then he slipped.

His right foot didn't catch on his last step and he fell toward the car. His head struck the bumper on his way down and he had one thought. *Don't breathe.* He was under the Jeep. He could feel its underside above him with his hands. He felt the shape of the transmission. *Should we have given her more time?* He was thinking about his wife. He pulled himself on the bottom of the Jeep towards the front of the vehicle. He felt the tires with his feet. He grabbed the bumper and pulled himself up. Tom realized he was standing behind the Jeep. He could walk, though and he did, slowly, around the car. He stopped at the driver seat window.

"Daddy!" his daughter cried out to him, anxious and afraid. But he saw that she still held the wheel and she held it straight.

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"I feel fine honey, it's okay." He wiped his face. His hand was wet and orange and he touched around his forehead until he found the tender wound. It didn't feel that large. "It's okay, honey." He ripped the sleeve of his white oxford, which was stuck against his body. He wrapped the sleeve around his head, making sure that it covered the wound. "I just hit my head." He touched her face. "Alright, one more time."

"Okay. One more time."

"Yes, I will be right back. When I come back I need you to jump over to the other seat, okay?"

"Yes, daddy. Yes."

His head was foggy and he couldn't push the thoughts about his wife out of his head. He felt the guilt that he had felt after they had removed her life support. He had dealt with that guilt already, or so he had thought. He had spent so much time with therapists, talking about it, discussing it. *Should we have given her more time?* Tom had always known the answer to that question.

He moved back around the car, back to the hood. He planted his feet and put his hands on the grill. This time he was deliberate. This time he was focused and careful. He walked forward and the car moved backwards. And then he felt it get more difficult – he felt the road. *Don't you fuck it up, asshole!* But he didn't, he pushed slowly and steadily, taking very small steps, almost shuffling his feet, using his body weight to drive the car backwards. After what he thought was at least a minute he stopped. *This has to be enough. It has to be.*

He maneuvered quickly back around the vehicle. "Kathy, move," he shouted as he passed the front tire. Katie jumped over to the passenger seat. He didn't open the Jeep's

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door. He grabbed the railings on the top and pulled himself up and in. He put the car in reverse and punched down on the gas. He heard the wheels spin in the water.

"No!" He yelled. Katie was crying as she watched her father punch the steering wheel, blood running down his face. "Why doesn't it work?" He was yelling and punching. He didn't want to turn the Jeep off because he was worried it might not start again. And then he realized what was wrong. The toggle switch between two and four wheel drive was set to FWD. He clicked it to AWD and hit the gas again. The back tires caught against the road and the Jeep moved backward under the engine's power. "Yes," he shouted, happy. "We're moving now baby girl." He reversed the the Jeep and moved backward, watching the road through the rain and the gray side. Visibility was pretty good and it almost seemed lighter than before. He couldn't be sure though. He moved the Jeep back onto what he could best make out was the top of Little Clam.

He put the window up, shutting out the sound of the rain and wind. Katie was still in the passenger seat when he put the car into park. "Come here," he said, grabbing her and pulling her onto his lap. "I'm okay, honey, we're doing good." He was stroking her hair. "You did such a great job. Thank you so much baby girl."

"Okay daddy." She stared up at him. "How is your head?"

He touched his head. The wrap on his head was soaked and he grabbed it off. "I think I'm going to be fine. Can you do me a favor, honey," he asked her, picking her up so that they could look at each other. She had her mother's eyes, a dark, emotive blue that looked like she was either about to cry or that she had just cried. "Can you go to the back of the truck and in my bag can you grab one of my t-shirts? One of the ones folded on the top?"

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"Yes." While she scrambled to the trunk of the Jeep Tom took off his shirt. He took his phone from his wet shorts, but when he pressed the home button there was no response. He knew he shouldn't, but he tried to turn it on. Nothing happened. He turned the radio up, but the warnings were the same as before: *State of Emergency, Flash Flood Warning, Roads Were Unsafe. No shit*, he thought.

"Oh," he shouted back at her. "Can you also bring up the first-aid kit - the white box?"

"I already got that daddy," she said to him waving the first-aid kit at him. He laughed.

"Thank you honey."

He changed his shirt and, with Katie's help, he cleaned out the wound and she helped him put a bandage on his forehead.

"You are being such a big girl," he said to her suddenly. "I am very proud of you." She was on his lap again, her arms around him. "We're safe now honey. We are going to wait in the Jeep until the storm passes through."

She didn't respond and he looked down at her. She was thinking. "Can we go back to the hotel?" she asked him.

"I'm sorry, baby girl. We can't. Not now. We have to stay here for a bit until the storm passes by us." He pursed his lips. He couldn't shake the thoughts about Kathy from entering his mind. *More time.* "Then we will drive home, I promise."

"I want to go home," she responded to him.

"Me too."

They sat quietly for awhile listening to the rain hit against the Jeep and the wind push against it, causing the shocks to moan from time to time. Tom watched the mangroves on

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the Gulf side, swaying violently. The big green leaves of the mangroves moved without rhythm and were thrown back and forth at the behest of the changing winds.

But then it started to slow and then it stopped. The sun was out. *The eye of the storm.* He put the Jeep in drive and it moved forward. He went slowly. As they approached the eastern bridge he saw that the bridge was washed out and covered in water. He put the vehicle in reverse and went back to where they were. "We will have to wait a little longer, baby."

"I know daddy." She said to him, still in the passenger seat. She had retrieved Fozzie from the backseat and she had him on her lap.

Out from the ocean side Tom saw a sea turtle walk out into the road. "Look Katie," he pointed towards the road. "A turtle."

"Wow," she exclaimed. "Do you think it's Tony?"

He rubbed her hair. "I don't know baby girl, but, I'm sure Tony is doing great." He paused. "He's much more equipped for this weather than we are."

"Yeah, I guess so."

He spotted another reptile, behind the turtle, lurking near the mangroves. "Katie," he said to her while watching the Ocean side of the road. "Can you go to my bag and get me my shaving kit?"

"Shaving kit?"

"Well, yeah, you know, the little brown leather bag."

"You're going to shave? Now?"

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He laughed. "Ah, oh, of course not. I just want my USB charger. I'm going to try my phone again."

She went to the back. He watched as the narrow, gray snout pushed out further. The large, scaled body followed. The crocodile - or alligator, he didn't know - moved slowly on its stomach. Its legs pulled its girth, which dragged along the road. Its eyes were black and rimless and didn't seem to take notice of the Jeep. After a moment the full body of the beast was on the road; his snout was on the centerline and his tail waggled on the shoulder. It was then he realized that the sea turtle hadn't been just waddling across the road. The turtle was running away.

"Baby," he called back to Kaitie. She was still rummaging through the main pocket of his overnight bag. "I need you to stay back there for a minute."

"What?"

"Just stay back there until I tell you to come up." He spoke quickly but tried to control his voice. The reptile continued to move across the pavement, slithering across as it pulled its wide body. The turtle waddled slowly a few feet ahead. *C'mon buddy, let's move a little quicker.* Its flippered feet moved furiously, but couldn't gain much purchase. Tom thought then about driving forward and trying to crush the reptile's skull. But he knew he couldn't risk the Jeep. So he watched - his eyes moving between the turtle and the alligator crocodile and the rearview mirror, making sure that Katie wasn't watching.

The alligator crocodile accelerated and was on the turtle in an instant. Its large snout snapped on the foot of the turtle. CHIRP! The sound pierced the air.

"Daddy, what's that?"

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He turned around and was relieved that she was still in the trunk area. "Nothing, honey, don't worry."

He looked back at the road, but it was empty.

Katie came back to the front of the Jeep. The sky was cerulean and cloudless. As they sat there in silence Tom felt how small they were, anchored to existence on a tiny mass that was barely an island in between the Gulf and the Atlantic.

The rain started slowly. Large drops hit the Jeep, plopping on the roof and the windshield and the hood. They were like the drops from a just turned off shower head - heavy and hesitant. It continued that way for a couple of minutes. Then it started pouring. The wind kicked up quickly and the Jeep strained from the pressure. It felt like they were leaning to the left. The suspension moaned and he thought he felt the right side tires coming away from US 1. Katie was in a panic and she had jumped onto his lap. He grabbed her quickly and put her back in her booster chair.

"Baby, I need you to strap in. I have to move the car." She shook her head, but didn't respond. She had tears running down her face but she wasn't sobbing.

He turned the Jeep, trying to steady it, trying to find the wind like a sailboat captain, moving in small circles on the road. He pointed it south according to the blue "S" in the rearview mirror. He kept it there for a second until he felt the car getting pushed, it swayed and then started sliding down US 1 back towards Key West. He turned it again, this time east, facing the way he wanted to go, the way home.

"You see, baby, we're good. We just have to stay in the car and we will be fine."

"Daddy?" She asked.

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"Yes."

"Where did the turtle go?"

He laughed. He couldn't help himself. It was the funniest thing he'd heard all day. "Oh, my baby girl, I imagine he's back in the water now." He kept on laughing. She started laughing also, not knowing what else to do. And in the middle of the island in the middle of the storm they sat shaking with laughter.

Their mirth didn't last long. The rain and wind picked up and the mangroves were shaking with fear. He didn't know why but he felt like if he was moving the car around the small patch of navigable road, then they had a chance to survive. The wind picked up and the Jeep started moving towards the shoulder. Tom turned the wheel all the way to the left, pointing the vehicle away from the shoulder and away from the Atlantic. An invisible hand, stronger than the engine, was moving the Jeep toward the water and toward oblivion. But Tom kept fighting it and then, without really thinking, turned the wheel right and pushed the Jeep towards where the hand wanted it to go. The vehicle headed for the water, its front tires were off the road and on the grassy shoulder. Tom kept the steering wheel hard right and hit the gas. The Jeep kept turning right, it was entirely on the grass, parallel to the road and the awaiting Atlantic, which seemed eager to envelop them. But it didn't. Tom was able to turn the vehicle back onto the road, back on the high ground. Nervous and exhausted, he put it in park and pulled the emergency brake.

He could see the water coming. The trunks of the mangroves were less visible than they were before. The water level was rising and he knew that there was no higher ground. *The sleeping pills in his shaving kit.* He turned around. "Katie, why don't you come sit up here

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with me?" She scrambled to the front of the Jeep. The mangroves were barely visible now and the grassy shoulders were smaller than they were before. He wondered if he should give Katie one of the sleeping pills or maybe even more than just one. He sighed and Katie looked at him. He wasn't yet thirty and he had already pulled the plug on his wife and was now thinking about killing his daughter.

Tom couldn't help but think about his wife. A random, reckless act and his own need to act had hastened her end. He knew the choice right then wasn't similar. But, if the water continued to rise then it wouldn't be that way and they would be swept into either the Gulf or the Atlantic. He wondered, for just a moment, if one was preferable to the other.

"Daddy?" Katie asked him.

"Yes, honey," he said to her, his eyes moist and his voice shaky.

"Can you read the book to me?"

"Of course, baby girl."

She crawled into his lap. The rain continued to beat down against the Jeep and the wind howled around them. He read the story to her as he had so many times before. As he moved from page to page he was more and more ashamed about even thinking about the sleeping pills. He said the final lines to her and then told her, "I'm going to love you forever, baby."

"I love you daddy." She leaned over and kissed him on his cheek. He held her, looking through the rain. Tom watched the water on the ground, hopeful that it was receding.