

## Roadside Crosses

"Henry," I said through the open screen door, "you 'bout ready?"

Henry's naked, sweaty head popped out from behind our Airstream travel trailer.

"Just hold your horses now, Molly. Soon as I get these lawn chairs packed, I'll be ready. Lock up the house and get yourself on in the truck."

I did just that: closed up the house and limped out to the truck cab. Henry and I have preparations down pat since we travel most every week. We're both retired, so we leave Mondays and return home the end of the week to avoid the heavy, weekend traffic of working folks. Two years ago, after Henry retired, our travels were more pleasurable. Then I had the accident and everything changed.

Henry climbed in. He pulled a rag from his pocket and wiped his brow. Then he turned and gave me a wide smile that revealed straight, white teeth and crinkled the skin around his eyes.

"Ready to roll?" he asked, and I nodded my assent.

Oh, how I love my husband. He's no longer the shy, dark-haired man I married 47 years ago, but the smile and the warm eyes he aimed at me today were the same ones I'd seen all those

years ago when we clasped hands before the Methodist preacher in the tiny, country church.

When I awoke after the horrible accident, it was the fear in those eyes that frightened me most. That look had been the warning beacon before I became aware of glaring florescent lights, the hum of strange voices, the tang of disinfectant. Then came the hot pain and Henry vanished behind a curtain of unconsciousness.

"So we head north up Highway 75 and then where?" Henry said, pulling me back to the truck and our task.

"The map shows a squiggly paved road that connects 75 Highway and the Interstate. I suspect it's used as a shortcut between the two major highways. I bet people look at the map, see the connection, and don't register that it's a curvy, dangerous highway. Plus, there's a couple of small towns scattered along the way. Road's probably used by bar patrons looking for a way home where the law doesn't patrol."

"That'd be my guess," said Henry. "Bet the road's slick in the winter, too."

"Yep," I said.

"Bad road, not patrolled well, probably has thin shoulders. Lots of accidents."

"Yep," I said again.

We had noticed the sad roadside memorials before on our journeys, but we passed them quickly, catching only a glimpse of the crosses, gay plastic flowers and weathered script. That was before my accident. Before the dump truck barreled through the stop sign and hit my Ford Focus, spinning it across the road and into the barb-wire fence. Before I hovered, how long I couldn't tell, in the warm, bright place somewhere between living and dying. The place was like an old train depot, passengers watching, in happy anticipation, for arrival of the smoking train engine. I had sensed others beside me, but only in a dreamy, intuitive way. Then the train station vanished, replaced by the pain, persistent and hot.

"Did you find a place to camp?" Henry asked. "Probably take us most of the day to get to where that road intersects with the highway."

"Yes, there's a KOA Campground just off highway seventy-five. I saw those little tree shapes on the map, so I suspect it's a scenic area. I called and made our reservation last week. Better if we set up camp and then start our search tomorrow morning. Better we're fresh."

"Yeah," agreed Henry. "Better we start in the daylight."

No need to explain that searching out the roadside shrines was an entirely different matter in the dark; with roaming

nocturnal animals, the dangers of parking alongside the road, and the manifestations, always more ghostly at night.

It had been dark the first time it happened, and it was an experience neither of us wants to repeat. I had finally been released from the hospital and was at home recovering from the accident.

"Honey," I had told Henry. "The walls are closing in on me. Let's take a drive. Doesn't need to be far. I just gotta get out of this house before I go bananas."

We took the pick-up truck, since we hadn't yet replaced the wrecked Focus. Henry drove slowly, avoiding the potholes. We went south on Highway 29, our favorite soft rock melodies playing on the radio. We stopped at a Sonic in a neighboring town and ate burgers and fries with the car windows open to the warm summer evening. It felt great to be outdoors again and the bulk of the truck provided a sense of security for my first outing. We drove home through the night, along an isolated county highway.

Suddenly, I noticed someone standing just off the pavement.

"Henry, watch out," I said.

Henry hit the brakes, I grabbed the dashboard and the truck shuttered to a stop in the roadway. His head whipped to the left and then to the right.

"What the hell?" he said. "Watch out for what?"

"There," I said, pointing ahead. "There's a girl out there. Can't you see her?"

"What? Where?"

I pulled my cane from behind the seat. Henry tried to grab my arm, but I was already out and hobbling toward the girl.

"Molly," Henry said. "We need to get out of the road. Get back in, please."

"You park the truck," I said. "I need to check on that poor girl."

I continued to hobble toward her, the blinking lights of the truck's emergency flashers distorting the night so I couldn't get a clear look. As I got closer, I saw she was just past puberty with narrow hips and small, high breasts. She was dressed in jeans and a loose white shirt with a dark design printed on it. One hand was raised, shielding her eyes from the truck lights. The other arm hung awkwardly at her side.

"Are you okay, honey?" I asked. I was still a few yards out and moving slowly with the uneven terrain and my gimpy leg. She didn't answer. Instead, she turned and looked down the road in the opposite direction. I saw there were more dark splotches on the back of her shirt. Long strands, of what looked like hair, ran down her back.

I heard the truck door slam.

"Molly, what's wrong? Wait up," Henry said. Then he was beside me, one hand on my shoulder.

"There. The girl." I said this to Henry.

"Are you okay, miss?" This I said to the girl.

"They left me," the girl said in a soft voice.

"Who left you?" I asked.

"Aaron, others. Can't find them."

I stepped closer to get a better look and halted. The dark patches I saw on her white shirt didn't fall into a recognizable pattern. What I thought were stems of large flowers I saw now were narrow lines that ran down her neck, across her blouse and disappeared into the waistband of her jeans.

"Over there," the girl said, and pointed to the line of trees that bordered the road.

I looked, but the only thing I saw was a white gash where something had torn a chunk out of a nearby tree. Henry had a strange expression on his face. I pointed to the girl. He shrugged, the puzzled expression still in place. I looked again to where she had pointed and this time saw one of those small roadside crosses just off the shoulder. I looked at Henry, the girl, the cross with its tattered bouquet of pink flowers and the damaged tree. Realization dawned and I shivered.

"Henry, is there a name on the cross over there?"

Henry walked toward the cross. When he passed the girl he brushed her shoulder. Neither of them took notice.

"It says 'Heather R.I.P., August 7, 1997, to February 18, 2013'."

"Heather?" I asked the girl. She turned toward me, her head cocked in a quizzical way. "Is your name, Heather?"

She paused for a moment, nodded slowly.

"Were you in an accident here with your friends?"

"Accident?" she asked.

"A year or so ago? In February?"

"Cold," she said.

"Are you cold?"

She rubbed her arm, the one that hung limply. "No."

"Are you hurt?" I asked.

She rubbed the arm again and looked down the road. It seemed to me that her outline had become fuzzy but, maybe, it was just the truck's blinking hazard lights that made it appear so. Henry was examining the tree where the bark was ripped away. He started back and then bent to pick something up from the grassy ditch. When he straightened, he had a piece of silver bumper in his hands. He looked at me and I could see he understood what had happened. He pointed to the cross and then to where I was talking to Heather. I nodded. He held out his

hands, palms up, in a 'what now' gesture. I raised a finger signaling him to wait.

"Heather, you were in an accident here. I'm guessing it was cold that day. February, right? Were you in a silver car?"

Heather nodded.

"You were driving?"

She shook her head.

"Aaron was driving?"

Heather nodded.

"You were hurt bad."

She looked puzzled.

"I think that's blood on your shirt."

Heather looked down, brushed at the blotches, touched her head.

"Your head and arm. I bet you hurt them. Did you hit the tree over there?" I pointed to the damaged tree.

She looked at the tree and then up the road again, still watchful. I took a deep breath, sorted through what had happened to me and what I needed to say to this lost girl.

"Honey," I said as gently as I could, "is your birthday August 7?"

She nodded.



"See the cross over there. It has your name and your birthday." I paused, unsure how to proceed. "There's a second date, February 18, 2013. That's the date you died. Look, see?"

She looked behind her at the cross, then at me with a puzzled expression. No mistake now, her edges were more diffuse.

"Heather, your wait is over. It's time to leave for the station. There's a train you need to catch. I know that because I was there once. I came back, but you have to go on to your destination. The train will take you home, you'll see."

I thought it would be like the movies where a ray of bright light guides the way, or an illuminated door opens, but it didn't happen like that. One second Heather was there, the next she was gone.

I let my breath go. It felt like I had been holding it for a long time, since the accident and the time when I hovered in the bright place with its souls waiting to start their journey. I swiped at the tear that had formed in the corner of one eye.

"Ready?" asked Henry.

"Yes," I said, and started my slow trek back to the truck. I'd explain to Henry what happened tonight, and what I had seen in the days after my horrible accident. I knew he would understand. We would reset our course, just like we had after the accident. After all, in our travels we had seen a lot of

crosses alongside the roads. I was certain now that many had confused souls waiting alongside.

"There's the sign for our KOA campground," I said, pulled back to the present. Henry put on a blinker and turned into the entrance. We'd park the Airstream, fix sandwiches for supper and tuck ourselves into bed, ready for what awaited us tomorrow.