

Accidentally Responsible

Craig Henderson

THEY SAY IN a car accident, things happen in slow motion. They say this is your brain's way of softening the impact, of explaining the sudden, inexplicable fact of mortality with a ruse—a smokescreen of denial.

Your brain puts off the inevitable by drawing each fraction of a second out, holding death at arms length even as it rushes toward you. You're a passenger in your own body, a spectator to your imminent demise. It's a dream; you tell yourself, this is not really happening, even as you snatch at the door handle, as you crash your shoulder against the door.

But it's getting darker by the second. Shafts of light reach out, but fall behind, snatched back by the depth of your mistakes. The car's interior smells of stale cigarette smoke, McDonalds and Jack Daniels. A hint of perfume lingers—perhaps in your memory, alone—along with the aftertaste of bile in your mouth.

Metallic grinding claws at your ears; scatters your vision into a dream sequence that resembles a life not unlike your own—removed from, but belonging to all that has transpired that afternoon. You got off work early, the voluntary retrenchment offer unread, still in its envelope. You hit the local hard; six or eight Jacks in forty-five minutes, a broken pool cue, bruised ribs. Spewed in the day care centre's car park.

At home, the final humiliation: a crumpled trail of clothing leading upstairs. Loud moans emanated from the bedroom—better known for the volume of your snoring, and the depth of your wife's loathing.

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There she was, bent over the bed—a total stranger doing things to her you have never been permitted. That look in her eyes when she glanced around and saw you watching: a mixture of triumph and satisfaction.

Still, none of that validates your actions. None of it will exonerate what you have done. Accidents happen, mistakes occur, lines are crossed every day. But responsibility is something you can't avoid. Only when the windscreen implodes does the enormity finally hit you. The water is freezing, but not as cold as the voice that reaches out from the back seat.

“I want to go home now. I want mummy.”