

Looking Through the Windows

It was an early spring morning in 1990, and as usual I was late for work. Every morning I drove to dad's house and from there he and I would ride to work together. I had been working for him for several months, but it seemed to me that instead of teaching me about work he was more interested in lecturing me about slowing down with the partying and self medicating. I was eighteen years old that spring – and I was as wild as the fields that surrounded the neighborhood I was now speeding through. Looking back it seems there wasn't much that could slow me down in those days, but as if on cue, a car stopped in front of me and put their left turn signal on. There was no way for me to get around them, so I slowed down and came to a stop. I began looking out the passenger side window of my truck at the neatly kept homes of my father's Tennessee neighborhood, and for the first time I really began to appreciate the beauty of the place where I had spent most of my teenage years. It was only in those years that I had really gotten to know dad because most of my life had been spent in an orphanage and in and out of bouts of abuse at the hands of my mother and her list of abusive husbands. Reflecting on those days, it's hard for me to determine which environment was worse. I guess the reason I never noticed the beauty of this neighborhood was because I was always running from one place to another, chasing a buzz or any other way to escape from the dizzying existence of life that I was accustomed to. If I were to slow down, I risked the chance of being caught by the hurt stalking me from the shadows of my consciousness, so instead, I searched for the peace that I would not find until much later in life.

Looking out that window that morning I took notice of how spacious the yards were and how thick and green the grass was, the yards looked like the striped fairways I had once seen at a golf course. I could see footprints in the deep carpeted lawn of one house that lead out to the mailbox where someone had went out to check the mail the day before. Each yard

was outlined meticulously with black or red mulch that permeated the air, along with the perennials and annuals that helped make up the scent of spring that was softly circulating through the cab of my truck. A light fog was resting above the yards which were decorated with large oak, hickory and maple trees that had been purposefully left in the 50's when the neighborhood was built. They had grown to be full mature trees and made the neighborhood look as if it had always been there. Their buds were in full bloom and the pink dogwoods that lined one driveway stood at attention displaying their round figures like giant balloons swaying in unison. Behind the row of neatly manicured homes a river flowed, it swirled and gushed in its normal mischievous way, and the low rising sun skimmed quietly across its surface. The facade of the worlds beauty would be challenged that spring morning by life's other less seen realities of chaos and tragedy.

The tail-light in front of me flashed repeatedly and seemed to be mocking me as if it knew I was late. I was growing impatient and was inching closer and closer to the bumper in front of me, almost touching the car ahead. As my eyes raised from the red blinking light to my rear view mirror, I noticed a car speeding over the hill twenty or thirty yards behind me. At first, I didn't see the driver, but then a womans head suddenly peered up from behind the dash board. She had obviously been reaching for something in the floor-board of her car and I could see by the surprised expression on her face that we were both thinking the same thing - this was not going to end well. Her speed, compounded with her late realization of the two vehicles stopped in front of her, did not afford her an opportunity to apply her brakes. At that moment the morning was happening too fast for me and for her. As her headlights cut rapidly through the morning fog I braced for the inevitable impact.

Sunlight had begun to pierce through the thick arching canopy covering the road, bursting into the fog like lights set for a rock concert. The intertwined branches of the canopy

swayed in the warm southerly breeze, as they seemed to dance in one continuous motion of brushing green leaves. Birds sang their morning songs as they awoke, nestled in their high nests, while squirrels bounced from one tree to another in playful games of tag. Across the river, I could see dozens of Holsteins grazing on the tall grass and I watched as a young calf bucked his hind quarters into the air as he thrashed his head up and down displaying his new life to the world in which he was only now discovering. A single, tiny red bird was sitting atop a fence post singing melodies of love to a group of smaller birds who seemed to be ignoring him as they chirped and cleaned themselves. The view outside that window of my cab contained the full natural world in bloom. It was spectacular and I envied its innocence.

As a reactionary response my eyes moved as if they were in slow motion from my rear-view mirror to the car in front of me, I was blocked in and there was no where for me to go. It was then that I first noticed what the car in front of me had been waiting on. A large cargo van barreling down the narrow two lane road just about to pass the car in front of me. I looked back into my rear-view mirror, to watch the speeding woman as she was about to collide with the back of my truck, and at the last second she jerked her wheel to the left steering her car wildly into the other lane of traffic, narrowly missing my back bumper. Just as her car came up beside me, the van too had begun to pass me, he was racing towards destruction and never seen her coming. The point of impact was just out of reach of my driver's side window and I could've nearly reached out and touched the two front bumpers as they met with almost perfect accuracy. The impact was ferocious. Crunching steel and plastic exploded into the silent fog with the force of a volcanic eruption. Revving motors, busting glass and screeching tires momentarily stunned me and the surrounding natural world. Both vehicles raised their back ends off the ground several feet from the force of the collision like the Hot Wheels that I once played with as a boy, as they slammed back down onto the

pavement, hot radiator fluid sprayed into the air, the smells of flowers and bloom were instantly replaced with smells of oil and burning gasoline. The van rolled backwards a few feet and caught fire where the engine used to be. The woman's car bounced violently backwards and slipped back behind my truck down a small embankment into the soft grass which slowed it down almost sympathetically.

It seemed as time stopped for a moment. The tiny red bird no longer sang, the winds had ceased, and the view from my driver's side window was much different than the view I had enjoyed outside the passengers window just seconds before. My first thought was to the woman in the car behind me and how desperately I wanted to get to her. I wanted to open the door of my truck but I kept trying to pull up on the lock while at the same time pulling on the handle. I knew this would not work simultaneously, but I pulled on both as hard as I could as I pushed the door with my shoulder to no avail. I slowly let go of the handle and inhaled a deep breath, as I released the air from my lungs I raised up on the lock and then pulled on the door handle, the door flew open and I found myself on the pavement in the warm radiator fluid that covered the asphalt, I scrambled to my knees, eventually getting to my feet as I heaved my body down the trail of fluids leading to the woman. Pieces of steel and plastic littered the pathway that I was on and when I looked down the embankment at the resting wreckage, I didn't see the same car my mirror displayed a few moments ago, rather, it was an unrecognizable sculpture of knotted metal. I ran down the embankment and arrived at the car, I realized that the front fender was crunched into place where the door handle should have been. I looked down into the car and the first thing I noticed was that her legs had been severed by the dash board that now rested below her thighs. The steering wheel had her pinned against her seat and her head laid sideways covered in blood. I tried to pull on the tangled mess but it wouldn't budge. It was as if a giant had twisted and mangled her car

which now cocooned her within its grasp. I heard her moan slightly and I said "hang on I'll get help," but I knew she couldn't hear me. Just then, a man who had come out onto his front porch with a phone placed against his ear yelled, "help is on the way." He had obviously heard the explosion of cars and immediately grabbed his phone. I stood there as helpless as I had ever been in my life, not knowing what to do next. Life was happening faster than I had ever experienced before and I was unprepared for that moment. Her moans stopped after just a few seconds and were replaced with the most ominous silence I can ever recall.

I knew what I didn't want to know.

People had begun to come out of their homes in their robes and pajamas and a few other drivers who had just come upon the scene were getting out of their cars to investigate. I turned with my head down and walked slowly away from the wreckage. I stepped up onto the road and kicked a large piece of wreckage out of my way as I clenched my teeth. My fists were balled up tightly as I reached for the open door of my truck. I flung myself into the cab and slammed the door shut with enough force as to draw attention from the shocked onlookers. The car that had been in front of me was now gone, there was nothing but open road ahead of me. I grabbed the gear shift and pulled it down into drive and as I slowly took my foot off of the brake, the truck released itself from the spot where it was setting when that lady made her last decision on earth that beautiful spring morning.

The tiny red bird returned to the fence post, and again, began to sing.

I pulled into dad's driveway and got out of my truck still in shock. I could hear sirens breaking through the fog which was now about gone. As I opened the passenger door of dad's truck he smiled at me and said "its about time boy." I turned and threw up in the grass next to the driveway. He said "what the hell's wrong with you? You better not have been out drinking again. And why is the side of your pants wet? I told you, you better start slowing down." I

didn't say anything, I just got into his truck and we slowly made our way down his driveway. He turned in the direction of the wreck and when we approached the blocked road he said "hmm, I guess there's been a wreck." He detoured onto a side street to avoid the chaotic scene and we went on to work. I didn't talk much that day.

Dad never stopped telling me to slow down but I never listened to him. I don't think it was that I didn't want to slow down, it was more of, I didn't know how to slow down. The trauma of early life had pushed me frantically ahead of my thoughts and I couldn't slow the slingshot of disaster that I had been shot from. So instead of slowing down I ran faster and faster until I couldn't brake in time from the inevitable disaster of hurting someone else. Twenty five years later, I am now in prison potentially for the rest of my life, I have finally slowed down and in doing so I often wonder if I have squandered the that lady's sacrifice. The instantaneous choice she made to avoid hitting me and instead putting herself in much greater danger came from instinct more than anywhere else. But it is that instinct that she had that I have often since wondered about. In that split second decision she made, I think she engrained in me that people are not as bad as the world tells us they are. Her instinct was to not injure the young boy who was sitting in the middle of the road with no where to go. I think this is a testament to who she was at her core. She performed a selfless act that morning for a stranger, a stranger who couldn't even get her out of her car, the one who walked away from her as she took her last breath and the one who has lived his life wrecklessly. It's taken a long time for her reaction to reach my senses, but when it did, I realized that the world is suspiciously beautiful and is indiscriminant in it's harsh treatment of the life that exists in it, while each one of us holds inside of us, a beauty that is not visual, but rather, connective. The last decision this stranger made was based on my well being not on her own. It was the most selfless act I have ever witnessed.

I am still learning from that incident all these years later and I think the most significant thing I have learned to date is that no matter what we do in life, the most important thing we must do, is to avoid the collision of hurting someone else.

Dad no longer speaks to me about slowing down. He doesn't speak at all.

I guess the hurt I have caused him was just too much.

Dad, I'm listening.