

"By the Highway"
Caroline Bybee

The trees were all dead. No leaves, bare fingers stretched towards the sky in a twisted sort of prayer. The houses below them had no prayer - not even one coming from a tree - that could save them. They were ramshackle, they were peeling paint and broken pipes. They were forgotten glass shards embedded in a crying toddler's foot, or cold wind blasting its way through a broken window. They were everything that a house should not be, hazardous and inhospitable and ugly. They spared the families embarrassment, though, the houses. They were all the same, the same despair, the same inescapable, cavernous appearance. They were nothing to be proud of, but at least they were no source of shame. Everyone had the same fraying twine clotheslines to hang their clothes on, and everyone had the same grimy underwear, full of holes but clipped to the line anyway, flapping in the wind. The children were the only ones who felt the shame. The adults had long since resigned themselves to their lot, to the idea that they would never escape this neighborhood by the highway, with the cars whooshing by at all hours of the day, headlights waking colicky babies that had finally fallen asleep, horns bleeding from kitchen to living room to silence. It was the children, though, who stepped on the glass shards, who were woken by the headlights, whose underwear flapped in the wind, and they were embarrassed by it. They didn't even know the word, the name for the burning feeling in the pit of their stomachs. It was like hunger, but more painful.

Humiliation.

It made them cruel. They hid behind names, behind insults whispered and passed in notes in class, behind the tough masks that their older brothers and sisters and cousins had taught them to wear. They spoke a communal language of hate, directed at each other but really directed at their parents, their homes, their lives. It made them tough. They pushed each other on the playground and never cried if they skinned their knees, never complained when they fell - WHOMP - from the monkey bars after the sharp shock of an elbow to their side. They learned before it was too late to never give any sort of weakness away, to never let your lip quiver or your eye shine with even a single tear. It made them lonely. They were mistrustful little creatures, clinging to the rusted chains of the swing set 'til their

hands turned red but never getting up, for fear that their spot would be taken. They had no one to watch them jump out of trees, no one to run for help if they broke an arm, an ankle. They had to do it alone, fling themselves into the air and hope for the best.

And so it was toughest on the children, whose favorite pastime involved weaving dangerously in and out of the cars that zoomed past on the freeway. The older ones, the teenagers, spent their time tucked away in corners, out of sight as they kissed and brushed each others' hair back, trying to learn too quickly the map of each others' bodies, but the little ones had no other diversion but racing across that wide stretch of asphalt.

No one did it of their own volition - it was always a dare, a challenge that put your pride on the line. You couldn't turn down a challenge, no matter how old you were, or how brave. You just had to gulp your fear down to that place in your stomach where it sat and simmered while you stared out at the rush of cars, so much like a tidal wave or maybe a stampede of wild buffalo. But they all did it in the end. Even the slow ones steeled themselves and took the plunge - everyone knew that their first step was by far the hardest. After that, instinct took over and you ran as fast as you bloody well could just so that you could get the hell out of there, and fast.

Only the bravest - or the most foolhardy - went across the entire freeway. Most stopped for a breather at the median before turning around and coming right back. Concerned motorists honked their horns (or maybe they were just annoyed at the children's game) and the whole world rushed by in the whoosh of the wind in the hollows of your ears.

Once in a while, though, someone would chicken out. They would get to the median and crumple - you could see it in their shoulders before they even turned around. They'd fall heavily to the ground, their butts glued to that tiny patch of grass as if it would never move again. Everyone knows that once you sit down, you're done for. Everyone on the other side, the safe side, would hiss, yell curses and insults. Even the youngest ones - the four year olds who'd never made the dash themselves - would join in. It was the ultimate disgrace, to give up like that. They were traitors to every single one of the kids waiting on the other side,

and they sat there with their butts glued to the median until nighttime, after mothers had called out dinner time and fathers had come home and smoked and showered. Then, when the cars were lesser, when they drove slower and more cautiously, then the traitors would return, like an unwelcomed prodigal son, shunned and spit on.

And then that boy had to go and get killed.

So indifferent were the children to each other - so numb to the presence of other human beings - that they didn't even know his name. He was just "that boy," or sometimes, "that boy that got killed." He was scrawny, that they all remember, with hair the color dry leaves would have been, if there had been leaves on the trees. He had a lazy eye and a lisp, but also a chip on his shoulder and something to prove. It was a sunny day when he was called out. An older boy was the one who did it; he and his family moved away shortly after. The dead boy was leaning on a tree near the school when he heard his name. He turned and looked in the direction of his attacker as best he could with his lazy eye, but mostly he was looking off at the sky. The older boy's voice was raspy and taunting. "Betcha don't make it across the highway." Words that they'd all remember, because the older boy won that bet. The dead boy had spit in his hand, then slapped it across the older boy's face. "Betcha I do." It was a brazen thing to do, not that any of that mattered anymore. The lines always tended to blur when death was involved.

They'd all trooped off to the edge of the highway - it was a Saturday, and this was an old routine. Hardly a weekend passed without someone making the mad man's dash through the maze of cars. Everything had gone as normally as ever at first. He made it to the median no problem, spit in his hand and held it up for the older boy to see. His lazy eye had twinkled triumphantly, or maybe just from the adrenaline, because there was always plenty of that. He'd glanced out at the oncoming traffic and judged a wide enough opening, sprinted his way out into the middle of the road.

He was two lanes from safety when the car hit him.

It was a little yellow thing, a Toyota, with a college-student driver. Her hair was pulled back in a pony tail and one could just imagine her perfectly made up mouth snapping

into a perfectly round O as his body crunched against her hood. Of course, she ground on the brakes, and of course it was too late. The children were transfixed but for the older boy, who had disappeared. They watched as the entire scene unfolded, the entire highway bringing itself to a stop like nothing they had ever seen before. Some of the younger children even clapped until their older siblings silenced them - shh, it's not polite.

As could be expected, there was a chaos, a panic. It was useless to call the ambulance like they did. The boy was clearly dead as dead could be. Maybe its purpose was for the college girl, who sat, hyperventilating and sobbing, surrounded by innocent bystanders who were all thinking the same thought: "thank God it wasn't me." Her hair fell from her ponytail in uneven clumps and her face was puffy and uneven. She looked, as the children would later describe it, horrified.

Every child had gotten a smarting red bottom as soon as they'd returned home, as soon as their parents had heard the news. Then they'd gotten a giant hug, then a few more smacks for good measure, maybe some hysterical tears, some sobs of "promise me that you'll never do that ever again." Never mind that their parents had probably run across the highway themselves, and maybe even their parents before them. And then there was a little funeral held for the boy. All of the children's parents dragged them to it, nearly snapping their wrists out of the sockets from the force with which they pulled them along. They were like the bystanders - "thank God he wasn't mine," - and they watched warily as their own sons and daughters squirmed in the wooden seats and they said a prayer of thanks, instead of one of protection for the dead boy.

His parents had a white cross put up on the roadside, meant as a memorial for themselves, and as a reminder to the children. They laid roses on it, faithfully, every week until they moved away. The children just watched from afar, and no one ever got closer than ten feet to it. They all had a sort of subconscious fear that they knew to be irrational, a sort of nagging dread that perhaps the dead boy was haunting that little two foot tall cross, with its gleaming white paint that you could see clear as day even in the deepest night. And that was how their new game was born, after a few bored weeks passed without the diversion of the highway. One by one, night after night, through

cajoling and teasing, they all took their turn to touch the cross.